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LINK TO THE NORTH



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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PLOWING THE ARCTIC

"This story of how the *St. Roch* made the North-West Passage from West to East is one that should find an honoured place in every travel library. It is the story of a dream come true. It is the story of modest, modern leadership—unflinching leadership, leadership by example; and such unflinching example that "achievement of the impossible" is made possible by this little ship's commander, Sergeant Henry A. Larsen, who has proved himself a worthy successor of that Viking, Roald Amundsen. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police may well be proud of Larsen and his men."

ADMIRAL SIR EDWARD EVANS in
The Sunday Times.



MICKEY RYAN

*As drawn by Kathleen Shackleton
for the Hudson's Bay Company.*

*Published with the permission of the
Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company.*

LINK TO THE NORTH

By
G. J. TRANTER



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LINK TO THE NORTH

I

“ Adventure ! ”

“ Easy Money ! ”

THESE are the calls of the North. With them she has lured young men for centuries. But when she has caught them, she withholds her favours while they learn that “ No man ever, yet, has drowned in his own sweat ! ”

Mickey Ryan, at twenty-two, did not push into the North looking for adventure or easy money. He simply took the only job he could get where he could have his brother, Pat, with him and he was willing to do the work of three men on the steamboat the Hudson's Bay Company had just built to ply the mighty mountain-fed rivers that rushed towards the Arctic in order to have that favour. For while Pat was something of a boxer and could defend himself against most comers in a free-for-all fight, his almost stone-deafness led him into many a misunderstanding ; and it was no part of his temperament to think first and hit second. He had the strength of a bull in his anger, and there had been times in the frontier city of Edmonton, when some of his victims had been “ a little stubborn about coming to ” after a blow from him ; so Mickey was anxious to have him where he could keep an eye on him.

If their mother could have seen them packing their grips and leaving for the boat that would take them down the great rivers of the North, she might have stopped them with her tears ; for, as she would have told you, “ Pat's no hand at all at hardship, and him deaf, too ; while Mickey was borned before he got his full growth and never has rightly been too strong, in spite of him doing all that prize-fighting.”

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But their mother was in Indiana, nearly three thousand miles away, and knew nothing about the new venture.

To Mickey, boarding the boat at Fort McMurray meant the end of his old life ; and he was not surging with hope and enthusiasm, nor did he feel the call of the North in all its sweet-wildness. Instead he felt himself yearning for the life from which he was being severed. He loved people as the flowers love the sun, and he was going into the solitary Northland where he would meet few of his own kind. Where the talk would be of foxes and furs and dogs and sled and frost-bite and weather ; and no one would care who won the world light-weight championship, or want to bet on the outcome of the contest for the heavy-weight title.

"Pull in the ropes !" the captain called, and Mickey pulled them in with strong hands that many men might envy ; but which he felt had cheated him. Over and over again they had broken in fights, and he had rested up in the hope that when they had mended he would be ready for another bout, only to find himself taking another rest. His last lay-off had been in Edmonton where he had tended bar at the St. James Hotel, while the mending process had gone on . . . Then a fight in Pendleton, Oregon, and he had had to admit that he was out of the game for all time.

And now he was pulling in the ropes on a Northbound boat, his dreams of a world-championship behind him. His dreams behind him.

His dreams behind him at *twenty-two*.

He had no time to notice the few passengers on the boat ; but his brother Pat leaned against a pile of freight and watched open-mouthed as a scarlet coated mountie talked first with a bronze-faced native in Cree, then turned to a black-robed priest and chatted in eloquent French.

"Mickey !" the captain called and Mickey ran in answer, to be ordered off on another of the endless chores to be done on a river steamer. He had no time for more

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than a swift look at McMurray with its handful of Indian houses and tepees and the little log cabins of the fur traders ; nor did he have time to wave to the villagers who stood on the river bank watching the brand new steamboat as she left on her maiden voyage that would take her first to Vermilion Chutes on the Peace River, then on to Fort Fitzgerald where she would deposit her cargo of winter supplies and take on a load of furs for the " Outside."

" Mickey ! " the captain called again.

Pat stirred, a little uneasily ; and his big figure sagged dejectedly as the boat snorted its way northward. In McMurray he had missed the bright lights of the frontier city where he and Mickey had settled when they left their native Indiana ; and he wished now that instead of heading for the North and its desolate wastes ; that they were travelling south . . . even only so far south as Athabasca Landing, with its two hotels, Hudson's Bay store, barracks, post office, blacksmith shop and friendly pool room. He remembered now the sign tacked on the white-washed wall of the post office, " It is decided to hold sports day on the first of July. The Committee has arranged a splendid programme of horse races, foot races and baseball game. Dancing in the evening." He would like to be there for sports day.

Mickey was coming towards him now. " Better lend me a hand stacking up the freight," he yelled into his ear. Then as Pat drooped, he added encouragingly, " You'll have things fairly easy until we dock. Then you'll have to help me pile on wood from the woodpile."

Pat did not like stacking freight. He liked loading wood even less ; and he was not loath to say so. But if Mickey heard his grumblings he gave no sign of it, and he worked like a demon in a mad endeavour to keep their jobs for both of them.

Neither of them noticed that J. H. Bryan, one of the passengers, watched with curiosity and admiration as the

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slim young man piled and stacked cordwood with capable hands that moved with the precision of a well-oiled machine, listened to the soft voice that answered the captain readily no matter how often he called "Mickey!" admiring the light step as he moved about the deck, and the hard-muscled arms and shoulders as they hoisted a packing-case or a sack of freight; and noting the keen blue eyes that darkened to grey in moments of stress, the while his lips buttoned on his thoughts.

Neither of them noticed Mr. Bryan, he was going into the North with his pockets well lined with money, looking for furs and adventure. Mickey Ryan had work to do, and he was doing it. Why should he notice Mr. Bryan?

* * * *

One day was very much like another.

Mickey, whose only knowledge of a boat had been acquired on his trip from Athabasca Landing down to McMurray, with Charlie Sanderson a Chipewyan Indian as steersman, was now learning that drifting down the river and over the rapids in an open scow is child's play compared with being deck-hand on a river steamboat. When they were about a mile out of McMurray they hit a niggerhead and put seven holes in the bottom of the brand-new boat, so that her pumps had to be kept going full blast while they patched her; and from every corner Mickey was hearing rumours that the new sternwheeler was destined to an early end.

"She stuck on the ways when she was launched," they would say darkly, and Mickey, city-ways, would not ask them to explain; but he knew from their tone that they expected trouble.

"For myself, I wouldn't be surprised if she died of indigestion or choked to death," he would say, with feeling. "For how one boat can eat up so much wood, I don't know."

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"I wouldn't mind entering Eternity at a moment's notice," one man said, fingering the back of a shaggy neck with fingers stumpy from frostbite, "But I'd like to get my hair cut first!"

Mickey had never done any barbering, but he picked up a pair of scissors and set to work; and soon the engineer, the captain and the passengers were fighting among themselves for the next hair cut.

"Maybe you could give us a shave, too?" one big trapper suggested; but Mickey refused. "I don't mind taking a chance on your hair. That'll grow in again," he told them, "But I don't like to take a chance on your throat." He shook the towel over the side of the boat, and scowled. "And, anyway, here's another woodpile!"

A hundred and fifty miles to Chipewyan, marked off by woodpiles, and talk of big money to be made easy "If we could only find a way to get the stuff out."

"Tar, we've got!" pointing with a brown finger in one direction. "Oil, we've got!" and no one can dispute it, for it is oozing in generous quantities from a fault plainly visible for seventy or eighty miles along the river bank. "And salt we've got, too!" A quiet puff at a stubby pipe, then, "Silver we have plenty of!"

A big man came over to Mickey. "You new in the country?" he enquired pleasantly. Mickey nodded. "Well, keep your hand in your pocket whenever you hear '*easy money*' in the North," he advised. Then, mournfully, "I got took plenty a while back on silver myself," he admitted. "A couple of fellows by the name of Devlin and Dardier came in here. Dardier spent several millions up here. He took in a diamond drill, and steam engines, and a lot of fine machinery," he chuckled. "He had to buy all the dogs in the country and hire all the dog drivers to haul in wood to fire them boilers." He spat at a crack before going on, "Then he found that didn't pay, and he went out and brought in some gas engines." He spat

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again. "Well, the muskegs are pretty bad to get over, and it cost plenty to get them into the country, and there was plenty of hardships to go through; and an awful lot of work was done; and they never got an assay over three dollars a ton, though they'd been counting on at least twelve!" He shook his head sadly, then said bitterly, "No, never count on easy money in the North. It just don't come that way!"

"Chipewyan!"

A dream village of chalk-white houses set above a pink sand beach, basking in the brilliant summer sun. A silver steeple, topped by a silver cross, rose high above the little matchbox buildings, and across the blue-green of the water came the clear call of the angelus bell. "*Pray for us . . . that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ!*" The little community was under the spell of the prayer.

The *McMurray* blew her whistle sharply, announcing her approach, and in a moment men, women, children and dogs were running down to the crescent beach, full of excitement at the coming of visitors.

Some passengers and a little freight were dropped off, news was exchanged, and the steamboat left for Vermilion Chutes.

Through Hell's Gate, up the Rocher River, and then the woodpile at the Mouth of the Peace River. A lone woodcutter's shack stood under the shelter of a little stand of pine, and Mickey was quick to notice how two of the tallest of the trees had had the lower branches lopped off, leaving a ball of growth at the top that stood out against the blue sky, clear and eye-catching, and somehow magnetic.

"Lobsticks, they call them up here," a big man in a Stetson hat told Mickey, pointing to the two trimmed pines. "They have them at points where a trail meets the water, or to mark a camp." He was chewing on a fat cigar now. "They're a great help when you're travelling with dogs in the winter-time," he said.

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Mickey nodded indifferently. He had no thought of travelling with dogs at any time. He was like his Grandfather Ryan, who upon coming to Canada after the Potato Famine, and seeing the Quebecers working dogs, hurried as fast as he could to Indiana where men were men and had a horse to sit behind.

The woodcutter was not home, but his cabin stood, unlatched, well stocked with provisions and tidy, ready to welcome any traveller who might crave its shelter. One of the trappers wrote a note of greeting and left it on the rude table, and five minutes later they were on their way up the Peace River through Land that lay in ripe readiness, waiting for the railroad to bring her people who would let her have seed so that she might enjoy the productivity she craved.

Already the odd Scot had settled with his family along this great river, and along some of its tributaries, where jackfish may be caught every day of the year ; in summer in flowing water, and in winter under the ice ; where a man may graze a couple of cows, have a team of horses for ploughing and hauling wood, trap a bit in the winter-time, and if he's lucky "make" enough fur to buy what must be bought at the store ; while at his door is some of the finest scenery in the world for his enjoyment, and in his heart a deep content.

They loaded up at Vermilion Chutes ; then came back down the Peace, and along the Slave River to Fort Fitzgerald, where they delivered their cargo, and Mickey was glad to tumble into bed knowing that for a few short days there would be no woodpiles, no cries of " Mickey ! " from the bridge, no ropes to pull in, nothing to do but rest.

Yet as soon as the first weariness was out of him he could not be still. He moved about, watching an Indian father distribute the fruit he had purchased among his family. An orange to each of the children, to be guzzled down, peel and all. Then a banana ; and Mickey marvelled

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at the way the little white teeth bit through the woody skin, then chewed at the mouthful with evident relish.

He tried peeling a banana with an obvious flourish so that they might be induced to follow his example ; but if they noticed the odd manner in which he ate his fruit, they gave no indication of it, and continued to munch with pleasure in their own way at the tasty treat.

Later when he learned that in the spring, starved for fresh fruit and vegetables, they peeled the bark from the white poplar tree and chewed at it, he could understand why they might relish banana skin or orange peel.

It was easy enough to get into conversation with the townsfolk of Fort Fitzgerald. All one had to do was listen. And Mickey was a good listener.

"All this country needs is a railroad," came from every direction ; and the entire population seemed to be standing still waiting for its coming.

"What we *really* need," someone would put in then, laconically, "is a good road between here and Fort Smith !"

They were off then, explaining at length how everything in the country was held back on account of the sixteen miles of trail between the two Forts ; and Mickey had to listen in detail to an account of the hazardous trips that had been made across it.

"Sometimes we have as high as three hundred tons of freight to haul across there in a summer ; and I'm a tellin' yeh, it's a job !" A swig at a bottle, then "If it don't rain and the trail's good, an ox can haul five or six hundred pounds ; but, man, it's seldom it don't rain." The voice almost lost itself in a flood of self-pity. "And when it rains the ox-carts get mired in the mud . . . sometimes for weeks on end."

A long swig, then, "And when it don't rain, brother, it's *hot* ! Then the mosquitoes and bulldog flies get yeh." He leaned over so that his breath was hot against

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Mickey's face, "The bulldog flies in this country are that big!" he measured off an inch on his forefinger and held it in front of his companion's nose, then felt in his pocket for the bottle he had stowed away, "If we could just figure out a way to lick that road," he said consideringly, "we'd be able to build this into the best country in the world." He put an arm around Mickey's shoulder. "We've got the best country in the world here anyhow," he told him. "We've got all the stuff in here. All we need to do is figure a way to get it out cheap." A pause. "We've got tar and oil and salt and silver," he hiccupped. "Brother, do you want to get in on something good?" He looked around to make sure that no one could overhear him. Then lowering his voice, went on, "I've got some silver claims that . . . I could let you in on. They . . ."

Mickey broke away from him then, and wandered out along the trail towards Fort Smith. He felt very small out there, with the roar of the rapids below loud in his ears; very small, very lonely and very much in awe of something bigger than himself. Something that was not the rapids and their power; but something that he quickly defined as the Power behind the rapids. He was overwhelmed by the feeling that there was something here for him. Something that if he had ears to hear, he could hear.

He kept on walking, drawn by some magnetic force that kept him moving, until he came to the spot that he recognized as the halfway mark on the portage, where a dark ridge of jackpine towered high to form a windbreak, and cool water sprang with a small bubble from among the rocks as if by magic, promising refreshment to parched lips. Mickey knelt by the spring and drank, for he was thirsty after his tramp along the eight miles of crooked trail from Fort Fitzgerald.

His thirst quenched, he got to his feet, telling himself that he must go back. Yet he stood there, reluctant to leave; and it was as it used to be when he came home as

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a child to the kitchen in Indiana, with the kettle boiling on the stove, the smell of cookies in his nostrils, and his mother's arms around him. Only now it was the boiling of the rapids, and the smell of the pine, and the North holding him.

A squirrel scampered, chattering, up a cottonwood tree ; and Mickey shook himself and started back to Fitzgerald.

As he walked, with the roar of the rapids below loud in his ears, he busied himself with wondering why, with the need for a portage over these sixteen miles of impassable waters, someone had not built a road that would permit the easy transport of whatever freight must pass to the North and South of it, supplies coming in and furs going out. He eyed the muskeg consideringly as he walked. Surely with draining and careful building with logs and sand, a road could be laid that would stand up even under the heavy rains that were frequent in the early summer.

The mosquitoes and flies were tormenting him now so that he hurried towards Fitzgerald, and he was glad to get behind screens and away from them ; but he could not forget the wild, haunting beauty of the Halfway Point, nor the feeling that had permeated him as he stood on the rise, looking down at the rapids, so that his first words were, " Why don't you build up a road between here and the Halfway Point ? The rest of it looked like it wasn't too bad."

" What would we build it with ? " was the first question.

" Logs, gravel and——"

They cut him off then, with " The nearest gravel pit is three hundred miles away."

" But there's plenty of logs," he pressed the point.

" I'm not going to build it up for all the other fellows to use." The answer came quickly, backed up by a stubborn glint in the eye that promised no yielding.

" Why couldn't all the fellows that use it get together, and do the work ? "

" Just as soon as we got it done, you'd have all kinds

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of outsiders coming in and using the road that we built,' was the reply. "There's plenty of people just waiting for someone to get that road fixed up, then they'll come in here."

"But if you had the road, and got the people in here, the country'd open up," Mickey argued, "There'd be more business and——"

"When would we do the work?" the men demanded. "In the summer-time it's too bad with flies; and in the winter you can't do any work because the ground is froze."

Mickey let the subject drop then; but somehow now the dark ridge of pine at the Halfway Point had worked itself into his dreams . . . was there, tantalizing him, calling him . . . And in his dreams there was a broad road winding above the rapids where the pelicans nested, and at the end of the road there was . . .

Somehow he always woke up before he found out what was at the end of the road.

2

"**P**ULL in the ropes!" And they were off again for Vermilion Chutes.

"It'll take us a week to get all the freight loaded up," the Captain said.

Mickey felt no elation when they docked. "Just changing from piling on wood to pushing trucks up that run-way to the Hudson's Bay warehouse," he grumbled.

Before long he was at the Captain's elbow, a little hesitant, but determined. "Why don't we put up a pulley?" he wanted to know; "and let the loaded truck come down, pulling the empty truck up?"

The Captain eyed him consideringly. "It's your brain child, you go work it out," he said, after a little thought;

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and Mickey made his way to the engineer. "I know a bit about blacksmithing," he said in his soft voice; "I could make the hooks myself, if you'd let me," he offered.

Johnson, the engineer, grinned. "I'll make them," he said. "Be glad to," smiling at the thought of the young lad before him thinking he could make hooks that would hold, not knowing that from the time Mickey was four he had done what he could around his father's blacksmith shop, until at fourteen he was holding his own with the best of them.

"I'll get them done," Mickey said, anxious to do the job himself, so as to make sure it was well done; and the engineer let him, with that *laissez-faire* of the North which is willing to permit every man to make a fool of himself at least once; but when Johnson saw the hooks he was glad he had let the young deck-hand make them for they were hammered and tempered with all the skill that comes from good apprenticeship.

The result of the new contraption was that instead of taking the customary week to load the freight, in twenty hours they were able to pull out, the Captain in high glee at being able to report to his company the fast time he had been able to make, and the crew glad to get away from the Chutes which had little in the way of amusement to offer them. Besides, they were all anxious to get away from shore so that the cook would sober up and get back on the job again, for he had told them that he would do no cooking as long as the boat was tied up at the Chutes, and he had made sure of keeping his promise by getting himself drunk on the lemon and vanilla extracts from the ship's stores.

"We're coming to the Rapids de Boyer," the Captain said gravely. "Mickey," he ordered, "you take one pole. And you," he called to Pat, "you take the other; and start sounding."

Quietly the two men picked up the poles and plunged them into the water, calling off the depth they got, which

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was easy enough to calculate as each foot of pole was plainly marked by a band of brightly coloured paint.

"There isn't much water for even a light boat," Mickey said anxiously, eyeing with dismay the many foot-length bands of colour that showed above the water.

"We'll be all right," the pilot called back, and Mickey kept on sounding and calling off the depth; but as the numbers he called kept getting smaller, and he thought of the gypsum ledge ahead, his voice became more troubled.

Suddenly, "Ripety, Rip, Rip, *Rip!*"

Mickey stopped sounding.

The boat trembled and rocked and swayed and shook, while the passengers screamed, and the Captain cried to "Stop her! Stop her!" without any thought of nautical terms or instructions.

Mickey rushed to Pat's side. "Stay by me!" he yelled into his brother's ear, "For I can hear and you can't!" Pat dropped his sounding pole and followed Mickey, who edged himself into a position where he would be one of the first to reach the gang-plank.

"Mickey!" the captain called, "Take a look and see how bad she is!"

"You stay here," Mickey told Pat, and ran to open up the hatch.

"She's pretty bad!" Mickey called up; and the captain scurried around issuing orders, "Get me the oakum! Bring it to me, quick! Take it to *him!*" indicating Mickey, as much with the tone of his voice as with the flurrying gesture that accompanied it.

A brown hand thrust the oakum at Mickey, while the captain yelled down instructions to "Stop her up! Stop her up!"

Mickey opened up the hatch again, and instead of taking the oakum and setting to work with it, he called up to the captain that he had better pull to shore, adding in a fear-stricken voice, "The boiler must have fallen through."

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The captain came running to see for himself, and with a muttered oath declared, "We'd better high tail it for shore!"

They did; anchoring alongside the high gypsum ledge; where they brought out the gang-plank and put up the staging. Then the captain ordered that they start hauling everything off the boat and set it on the limestone ledge.

Passengers and crew set to with a will, and more than half the freight had been piled on the ledge when Mickey tapped at the Captain's elbow. "What will you do with this freight if it starts to rain?" he wanted to know.

"What do you mean?" the captain demanded irritably.

"We're carrying it up and setting it on that limestone ledge," Mickey said quietly, "But we're not getting it any higher than it would be on the boat. If the water should rise, and if it rains . . ." Mickey shrugged. "Well, it would get terribly wet," he finished flatly.

The captain let out a roar, and stamped off by himself to ponder on this new difficulty.

In an hour he was back, his face dark and his eyes uneasy. "I wouldn't get much co-operation now if I was to give orders to move the freight back on to the boat again," he said to Mickey. "So you and Pat get busy and cover the stuff up with tarps. That'll keep the rain off of it." There was a gloomy pause. "If the river rises——" He walked off, leaving Mickey to imagine what would happen if the water rose.

"Come on, give me a hand!" he called to Pat; and they spread tarpaulins carefully over the piles of freight while the cook looked down on them from the bank above; down which he had slithered drunkenly until he had been stopped by a tree. Astraddle it, he waved an extract bottle in one hand and a cork in the other, while he hurled drunken

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taunts at the two brothers. Occasionally he would stop his jeering and break into song :

“ A hell of a God-damn Steamboat.
It hit a little rock and went to hell.”

A swig of extract and he would return to his gibes.

“ Just a fool for work ! ” he’d call. “ Everyone else playing poker, and you looking after the freight ! Just a fool for work ! ”

That night the river rose fourteen feet, and freight and tarpaulins were swept down the river ; and Mickey railed at himself for not having carried it back to the boat, before he realised that most of the freight on the boat had been carried away, too, for the *McMurray* was now well under water.

“ Mickey ! ” Captain Mills’ voice was full of decision as the young deck-hand moved to his side. “ You’ll have to take the lifeboat and get a message out to the telegraph office at McMurray . We’ve got to get supplies rushed in here, and then moved on to Fitzgerald with scows if we don’t get that boat lifted in time.”

The captain’s voice held concern for his boat ; but there was in it, too, the knowledge of what a shortage of supplies could do in the North, where the low temperature makes a large supply of fuel-building food a necessity, and a shortage of medicine, matches or ammunition may mean the loss of many lives.

But to Mickey the thought of making the five hundred miles in a small boat was terrifying. “ There must be some of the fellows here that have had experience of the country, trapping and all. They’d do it in better time than I would,” he faltered.

The Captain said nothing.

“ All the ship experience I’ve had is on this boat handling cordwood and freight ; and coming down from Athabasca

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Landing . . . and then we lost all our provisions as we came down the rapids." Mickey was cold now with remembrance of that trip, when with Charlie Sanderson, their Chipewyan guide as steersman, their scow went up over a wave, while Mickey thought "Oh, this is lovely!" only to have the scow dive suddenly to fill with water from the stern so that all their baggage started to float away.

Mickey, not knowing that this did not happen every time a boat went over the rapids, did his best not to show anything of the consternation he was feeling, when he heard a yell, "Bale her out, Mickey! Bale her out!"

Mickey started to bale, but with the water up to the gunwales, he paused in his baling. "Hell, I can't bale out this river!" he said and threw the bucket down in disgust.

A second later he was grabbing for the sides of the scow and holding on with all his might for they were being given a broncho ride of the wildest kind. Above the sound of the water and the knocking of his own heart, Mickey could hear Sanderson's voice telling them, "No scare, boys! No scare! Hang on to the boat!"

Mickey stole a glance at the dark face of the steersman; but it brought him no comfort. Sanderson was as scared as any of them.

Down the rapids they went, down, down, and still farther . . . until they were almost past the island that cuts the rapids in two. Mickey held his breath now, for a huge wave marks the meeting place of the channels, and when they struck it, the boat would surely capsize.

"No scare, boys! No scare!" Sanderson told them, and they struck the wave.

Mickey shut his eyes. This was the end.

"We met it on the side," Jimmy Donovan, one of the passengers exulted, and Mickey opened his eyes to see that most of the water had been knocked out of the boat. But at the same moment he felt relief over that, he realized that

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the boat was still in danger of capsizing, and fresh fear swept over him.

"No scare boys, no scare!" That was Sanderson again. Then, "When you get the oarlocks in, you'll get a little better control of the boat," he told them; but it looked to Mickey as if they would never get the oars back in the oarlocks, fumbling and awkward as they were. For a moment he cursed their unsteadiness, and wanted to blast at them in a fury of words. Then suddenly they steadied, and he forgot his anger.

They were safe.

Their supplies were gone, but they were safe.

But now Sanderson was speaking. "We've got ourselves out of the channel," he commented, his face a mask. "A little ways farther on and we're going to drift down the Little Grand Rapids. No good for us." He shook his head. For a long moment that seemed like an hour to Mickey, he sat like a bronze statue designed to wear a look of contemplation. Then he turned to Mickey, "Can you jump to shore?" It was not a question. It was an order.

Mickey looked at the cold, turbulent water. He hesitated a moment, then grabbing the painter of the boat he jumped as far as he could. He missed the shore by several feet; but, fortunately, he lit on a little stone ledge, from which he scrambled his way to shore.

"Good!" Sanderson grunted his satisfaction as Mickey reached the shore before the rope got played out.

The scow was moving fast with the current now, and Mickey was dragged along the shore for several yards by its weight before he could get to his feet. Then suddenly, he was up and running on ahead to where a large grey rock reared itself. Quickly he ran the rope around it, and a moment later the scow swung around and her passengers scrambled to shore.

"The front end of the scow is going to pull out from the rope-break," Sanderson said slowly, as they began to pull

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her to shore, while the current clawed at her, unwilling to let her go.

At last the men won ; but the scow was so battered and crushed in the battle that they might almost as well have let her go.

"Nothing left but a box of wet cigars and a case of brandy !" Donovan was already reaching for the brandy.

Mickey, who had no taste for liquor, moved quickly to build up a fire so that they could dry their clothes, and as he worked he promised himself to keep away from scows and rapids and water for ever after.

"It isn't that I want to get out of doing anything," he told the captain, "But I don't think I'd be much good. You see——"

Captain Mills gave him no chance to explain. "I'll take a chance on you," he told him, with confidence, and went on to say that he had better take the lifeboat as far as Chipewyan, then see if he could pick up a canoe there. "It'll be hard work tracking from Chipewyan to McMurray," he commented. "It's no easy job taking a boat of any kind against the current, and you'll need strong men that can pull." He paused a moment. Then, "Which of the men do you want to take?" he wanted to know.

Mickey eyed the men consideringly. "My brother," he said quickly. Then, "I'll need two others."

"Better take the cook along," Captain Mills suggested. And at Mickey's look of dismay, "If he's any trouble to you, you can leave him at one of the posts and we'll pick him up later." He lowered his voice then confidentially, "The cook's one of the best when he's sober ; and he'll soon be sober."

* * * *

And now the captain and pilot of the sunken boat were giving last minute advice and instructions.

"Go down the river ; but at four o'clock to-morrow

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afternoon work to the right side of the river and watch closely to find where the Quatre Fourches goes into Chipewyan." The captain was looking anxious now. "If you happen to miss the Quatre Fourches River, and should go to the mouth of the Peace River where it joins on to the Rochers River, it would be best to land and track back the ten miles to the Quatre Fourches; otherwise you'll have hard tracking against the stream all the way from the trappers' cabin into Chipewyan.

Mickey put forth a tremendous effort to learn the instructions off by heart, and the four men took their places in the boat.

"I'll steer. Each of you will row for an hour, then change off," Mickey reeled off his instructions easily to cover up the uneasiness he felt at undertaking the responsibility for the safety of the little craft and the swift accomplishment of their mission.

He was looking down the river, his face full of foreboding and fear, when Pat leaned over to him. "So much has been going on, I clean forgot it was your birthday. Many happy returns!"

Mickey grinned. This was a birthday he would never forget, even if it bore little resemblance to the birthdays back home when his sister Blanche would fling warm arms around him and give him a kiss for every birthday he had known, and there were laughter, and merriment, and giggles, and surprises that come with birthdays in a big family.

"Oh," the cook said with a hiccup, "Your birthday? Wish I had a stove. I'd cook you a cake." He laughed drunkenly at the thought. "How old are you?" he asked soberly a moment later, eyeing the young face of the lad who was their steersman.

"Twenty-three."

"How come you got born on the 11th of July?"

"Why didn't you wait until the Twelfth?" the other man asked, as he pulled heavily on an oar.

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A broad smile passed over Mickey's face, as he remembered his mother's voice as she told about the birth of her fourth child. "He was borned before he got his full growth," she would say in her pleasant Indiana voice, a little shy at using the word "premature," "And he was without doubt the homeliest baby I ever did see. The doctor said if he was to cry, it'd be the end of him ; so his father walked around with him on a pillow until his arms got so swole up he couldn't walk no more."

With quiet efficiency, Mickey saw that the men rested between their turns at the oars, husbanding their strength for the long trip ahead. Saw to it, too, that they pulled to shore and made hot tea with which to swill down the sandwiches they had brought with them from the *McMurray*.

Daylight began to break, and Mickey yielded himself to the beauty of it unresistingly. The grey sky gave way before the Master Dyer, who brought forth his stock of carmines and pinks, blues and mauves, which he mixed with wild delight, before choosing a Northern blue softened with gardenia-white patches, that shifted and changed and delighted him.

The birds, awake before the dawn, had begun to tweet plaintively as if afraid of the quiet greyness ; but as soon as the light broke they poured out a symphony that must have been inspired by the prayers of the people that go up every morning, "*I commend to Thy safe keeping and to the haven of Thy loving kindness, my soul and my body this day, and every day. All my hope and my consolation, all my cares and miseries, all my life and my life's end, I commit to Thee.*"

A feeling of exultation swept over the men in the boat, touching all of them, although Pat, being deaf, could hear nothing of the song.

And then Mickey stood up in the boat with a startled cry.

"We're at the mouth of the Peace now !" he was

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pointing to the woodpile and the woodcutter's shack ; and he started to steer the boat in close to shore so that they could land and start to track back to Quatre Fourches, as he had been instructed.

"And now," he told himself, "lack of sleep is telling on you," for the boat started to drift up the river towards Chipewyan.

For a moment he thought he must be dreaming, and he closed his eyes, then opened them again. The landmarks were still there, and the boat was drifting upstream towards Chipewyan.

"I've always seen the current go away from Chipewyan," one of the men ventured. "And now it's going towards it!"

"We must be lost! It can't be!" That was the cook.

Pat: "The river is running upstream!" in awe. Mickey had to believe it then.

In a little while: "Right here is where the Rapids used to be," still doubtfully.

Later: "Now we're coming into Hell's Gate!"

Still the boat kept drifting, although they knew they should have been tracking against the current. Had the world turned upside down? Had there been an earthquake?

"Rivers don't start running upstream all of a sudden without *some* reason!" That was Pat. His face was green-white, and Mickey remembered the first time Pat had smoked a cigar. He was eleven then, and his face had looked just the way it did now.

"When we get through the Dog's Head, we'll know what's happened to Chipewyan," Pat said despondently.

Mickey had nothing to say.

And suddenly there was Fort Chipewyan before them ; its white houses as white as ever, brown limbed children playing among the red rocks, while mottled dogs lay in

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the sun snapping at mosquitoes and flies in lazy anger. Mickey felt a sob of relief in his throat at the sight of it, and when Fred Fraser came running down to the beach, with a dozen others at his heels, he could have hugged them.

"What's wrong? What's wrong? Where's the steam-boat?" they cried at him.

But Mickey put them off. "First tell me what would make the river run *upstream*?" Even now he was a little uneasy about putting such a thought into words; for suppose they were only imagining it. He had heard of men who had taken to imagining things in the North.

But Fred met his eyes squarely as he said, "When the Peace River is high from the mountains, it runs into Lake Athabasca until it is filled. As soon as the lake gets filled, the river runs the other way."

Mickey chuckled and a little gasp of relief went out of him. "I kept a-gawking and a-gawking," he told them, "I just couldn't believe the world hadn't come to an end or something; and I kept wondering what was ahead of me."

Fred Fraser laid an understanding hand on Mickey's shoulder. "Many strange things happen up here," he said quietly, "You can get plenty scared of nothing sometimes."

As soon as they had eaten, Mickey went into the Hudson's Bay "Post" and presented a letter from Captain Mills authorizing him to get whatever supplies he might need for the expedition.

"I've got to get something we can eat cold, and that we won't lose any time manœuvring around with," he told the Post Manager, who let him have his way when it came to tea, sugar, flour and salt; but when Mickey started picking up such things as bottles of "George Washington" coffee, he protested.

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"Hudson's Bay servants aren't allowed such things," he said in sharp reprimand.

Mickey's ire rose now. "I'm no servant of the company," he said angrily, "I'm on a special mission. We've got to have stuff like that coffee that you can open up, and there it is ready with the cream and sugar in it. All you need is the hot water."

The manager reluctantly added the coffee to the pile of other things.

"And a couple of boxes of them." Mickey pointed to a box of Old Venture Cigars.

"These are the most expensive we've got!" The manager made no move to reach for them.

"These men have no time to spend cutting tobacco and rolling cigarettes," Mickey urged.

The manager opened his mouth to say something, but Mickey cut him off with, "We're just losing time while you argue. You've got the order," he reminded him sharply. "You don't have to pay for it out of your own pocket." The words were soft spoken enough, but they were backed up by a well-trained body that knew the prize ring.

When they pulled out, they took the cigars with them; and Mickey gave the men instructions for the long trip to McMurray. Telling the cook he would have to act as steersman, he turned to Pat, "You'd better team up with me, and we'll take the first turn on the tracking line."

Pat puffed on a cigar and tried to hide his reluctance to tramp along the river's edge, pulling on the heavy tracking line; but he could not keep himself from saying: "If grandfather could only see his grandsons acting as horses in the North, he'd turn over in his grave!"

Mickey grinned. "It won't be for long," he comforted. "We'll spell over. The other two'll take over in an hour."

Pat took hold of the rope and began to pull.

Five days of tracking over rough and uneven ground,

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tripping over rocks and wading through water, brought them the nearly two hundred miles to McMurray, and when the telegrams had been sent, they made their way to the newly built log hotel where they tumbled into bed, to sleep on mattresses and between sheets. Delights they had almost forgotten existed.

"I had no idea I was so tired," Mickey said as he hung his socks over the back of a chair, in the manner of the North. Then, with a yawn, he settled back on his pillow and fell asleep. It was days before all the sleep was out of him and he was ready to undertake the trip back to the Chutes.

* * * *

"The water has dropped down to the deck of the boat," Mickey said when they came within sight of the Chutes again; and smiled as he saw that all hands, including the passengers, were busy cleaning the cabins and upper deck, which had acquired more than their share of mud.

But they still had to wait another few days before the water lowered enough so that the engineer could get down into the hatch and find out where the breaks were.

When he came up it was to say, "They weren't hard to track down." Then sifted the words at them, "Got forty-eight holes in the bottom!"

Mickey expected that he would tell them that the boat would have to be left there; but when he suggested it, the engineer laughed. "Leave her? A brand-new boat . . . even though she has forty-eight holes in her . . . Never!"

"But how will you get her fixed?"

"Oh, I'll put a slab of bacon down over the holes," the engineer told him while Mickey listened unbelievably, "Then put a plank down over it; put a jack on that; screw the jack down, and the bacon will squeeze down and hold the water out."

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Mickey watched the job being done, helped pump her out. Then held his breath when they started the engines and she began to move down the river. Every woodpile they arrived at he expected to be the last ; for how could a big steamboat travel on a few slabs of bacon held down by a plank ? But she did.

However, as soon as she docked, Mickey yelled in Pat's ear that from now on he'd leave boats alone, and get himself a horse. Pat nodded, and laughed, thinking Mickey was joking. But soon Mickey was looking around McMurray for a team of horses to buy. "A medium-sized team that I can use around McMurray for hauling fur or wood, and that we can use as pack horses or for hauling moose meat out of the bush."

After some haggling and bargaining, the team was bought and the Ryan Brothers were ready to do any hauling they could get to do. But business did not come rushing at them, and there was need for some other source of revenue ; so borrowing some blacksmith's tools from the Hudson's Bay Company, they let it be known that they were ready to shoe horses and do blacksmithing work, too.

"We put in a fair winter and ate well," is how Mickey describes that first winter in the North.

3

THE other Northerners might tick off the coming of spring with :

April 8th, the grey goose seen.

April 19th, Mosquitoes.

April 22nd, Gulls and robins.

April 30th, Frogs.

May 10th, Sand martins.

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But to the Ryan Brothers time was marked by another new horse and another new horse, until now they had seven in their train.

Winter was behind them, and they were getting a toe-hold on the North, and learning the ways of the country and its men, white, brown and all the shades in between ; and Mickey was not above learning from any of them. Although he did hope that he might never have to resort to some of the Indian medicines and cures, however much faith he might have in them. Their cure for snow-blindness, for instance, was simple enough, and of its curative value he had no doubt ; but when he thought of leaning over a mother as she nursed her child, to have her squirt some of the warm milk into his aching eyes, he was overcome by a shyness that he was sure would never permit him to take advantage of such "medicine." He did, however, use their method of guarding against the bright sun by smudging a ring of charcoal around each eye before venturing out for any length of time when the sun was shining, so as to make of the snow a reflector that dazzled, bewildered and blinded the unprotected traveller.

The disappearance of the snow brought an end to the fear of snow-blindness, and for that he was grateful, too.

"Now, if we're lucky enough to get some of the horse pack work going from McMurray across to House River and out to the end of steel, we'll be on Easy Street !" he told Pat, who brightened. Easy Street couldn't come any too soon to please him.

"They say the steel is as far as Lac la Biche now," he said. "How soon do you think they'll get to McMurray ?" he wanted to know.

Mickey put his arm around his brother, and putting his lips close to his ear, shouted, "Don't go counting too much on the railroad bringing fame and fortune to the town," he told him. "If it brings us more work, that's all we can hope for."

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A voice behind him cut in then. "As soon as the railroad gets in here, I'm going to sell out my store and light out of here. Prices'll soar after the railroad comes in."

Mickey was brushing down one of the horses. He turned now, and picking up a curry-comb, asked his visitor, "How did you ever come to settle in this part of the country?"

The man seated himself on an upturned bucket, and picking up a straw, began to chew at it, "Can't say as I ever *settled* rightly," he said, "I just came with the idea of making a little money fast, then going back home." He sighed. "Well, I been stuck quite a while . . . but now," his face brightened, "Now I'll be getting out."

Mickey started to use the curry-comb on one of the horses, talking as he worked. "Didn't *anyone* come up here with the intention of *staying*?" he enquired.

"Naw!" emphatically, "Who'd want to stay here?"

Mickey wanted to say "me" in a proud voice. He wanted to tell of the feeling he had of belonging here, of the dream he had of one day making it possible for all the people of the world who wanted to, to pour in over that sixteen mile trail between Fort Fitzgerald and Fort Smith, and for the riches of the North to journey south for manufacture and use all over the globe.

But he said nothing; just went on doing the job he was doing; and no one would have suspected that behind the twinkling blue eyes was a dream of such magnitude.

"J. H. Bryan is looking for you, Mickey!" a voice called through the stable door, and Mickey hung the curry-comb on a nail and, calling to Pat to keep an eye on things, went up to the Franklin Hotel to find Mr. Bryan. Mickey remembered him as the man who had been a passenger on the *McMurray*, a friendly fellow, Mickey thought, but with shrewd eyes and a quiet power that marked him off from the easy-going Northerners who were always talking about what they were going to do to-morrow or a week

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from to-morrow ; but gave no thought to what might be done to-day.

Mickey was glad to have a chance to chat with him ; but when, greetings over, Mr. Bryan told him that he had brought all his fur into McMurray from the North and wanted him to transport it to the end of steel, he was overjoyed. A big trip like that was what he had been hoping for, but had hardly dared to expect. Now it was his.

"I'll get Grant Owens to come with me," he said, and Mr. Bryan lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "I thought you'd want to take your brother," he said mildly.

"I'd like to take him all right," Mickey said wistfully, "but Pat's got no sense of direction at all. Why, you take at bedtime, when he goes outside," Mickey's voice was full of seriousness, "if he goes the distance the unwritten law calls for, he's more'n likely to lose himself, and can't get back without help."

Mr. Bryan grinned. "Those hundred steps they make us take from the door of a camp, can seem an awful long way on a dark night," he said, "Especially if there's a coyote howling."

Mickey's eyes danced. "Well, one good thing," he said, "Pat can't *hear* the howling."

It was a proud day for Mickey when he pulled out from McMurray with his seven horses loaded with fur for the south. Maybe next year he would have twice seven. Maybe some day he would have as many as twenty horses, he told himself, "*and they'll travel that narrow trail from Fort Smith to Fort Fitzgerald, and the trail will be wide enough for them to travel four abreast!*"

Late that day, with twenty miles behind them, he called to Grant Owens, "How about camping in that heavy timber we're coming to?" pointing ahead to a spot where tall trees looked down on a lake-like slough.

"Good shelter there," Grant commented, "and plenty of feed for the horses."

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Mickey agreed, and ran ahead to pick the camp-site.

When the others came up, "Might as well set the fur on these," Mickey said, nodding towards some logs that lay to one side. "It's a shorter lift to the ground," he said quietly and started unloading.

Then they made a fire, boiled water for tea, heated beans and fried bacon, while they chatted of the winter's work.

"You've done pretty well, Mickey. Seven horses. Not bad for such a short time in the country," Mr. Bryan encouraged.

"I learned the first day in this country that a man had to work fast," Mickey smiled, "We got into McMurray in time to go to a funeral," he said, and went on evenly, "The bereaved widower was attending the funeral of his first wife with his second wife sitting beside him."

Mr. Bryan gasped.

"And that night," Mickey went on, "the two of them went to a dance and they both enjoyed themselves and had as much fun as anyone there."

Mr. Bryan sipped at his tea for a moment before saying anything. Then, "Well, I must admit that was a bit raw," he said. "Still," he considered, "Women are pretty scarce up here, and . . ." He broke off, finding it hard to find any excuse for such conduct, when Mickey chuckled openly. "The first wife got drowned, and they didn't find the body for two years," he explained. "In the meantime the fellow'd got himself married again, and after two years and being married and all, there was no other way they could have done, except the two of them go to the funeral together, and then go on to the dance."

A wind came out of nowhere with such suddenness that Mickey almost lost his balance. Mr. Bryan grabbed for his hat and held on to it. Grant Owens pounced on a tin pie plate that was threatening to blow away, and the horses came running, snorting and blowing in terror.

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Mickey turned to soothe the frightened animals and tell them it was nothing when a tree overturned and gave him the lie.

Another tree came out by the roots and crashed into the timber around it, slashing at limbs that tore noisily from their trunks, while leaves dripped like great tears all around them, and the horses trembled and shook and snorted though the men tried to pacify them.

Rain ! Big drops that made a splash the size of a fifty cent piece. Not the gentle rain for which a parched earth may crave ; but a rain that meant to soak and drench and destroy. In a few minutes they were up to their ankles in water, and no higher ground near to offer itself for a camping place.

Mickey could hear Mr. Bryan's breath being sucked in now, and then his voice saying, "Well, I guess this finishes me. Every dollar I've got is tied up in that fur and it will all be ruined."

Mickey rubbed at the ears of the sorrel horse, then felt at his velvet nose, before saying anything. He had been so conscious of gratitude that none of the horses had been killed by falling timber that he had forgotten the fur.

"It's up on those logs," he said quietly, "And I covered it well with pack covers. It'll be all right."

Mr. Bryan nodded. "It's all right now," he admitted, "But with all the muskeg and rivers we'll have to cross, I don't see how we can get through after this storm." He let his voice trail off, indicating the felled trees that would provide a block, even where swollen streams and muskeg might not.

Mickey's chin jutted out. The trip would have to be made. "We'll just have to make up our minds to do a lot of chopping in order to get through," he said. "Besides," he clutched after a forlorn hope, "There's no

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telling. The storm may not have cut as wide a swath as we think."

"But there's still the rivers and muskegs." Mr. Bryan's voice was full foreboding. He pulled out his knife and, opening up the blade, began to whittle at a bit of stick he had picked up from the ground.

"As far as they go, we'll just have to take our time and make rafts to take the fur across the creeks," Mickey told him determinedly.

"But we're going to run out of food and everything," Mr. Bryan made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"We'll have to content ourselves to live off the partridge and rabbits," Mickey said resolutely. "Although," he added, "I will admit I hope the partridge is plentiful, for a diet of rabbits doesn't give you much strength for a day's work." Then, hopefully, "Maybe we'll meet up with some natives and we could get some dried meat from them. One thing about the pemmican the natives put up, you can work on a meal of it." Then went on to explain how the Indians put up their meat, adding pounded blueberries, choice white tallow from the cariboo, and golden syrup from the birch, so that it made a tasty and healthful meal that gave a man energy for the heavy work he would meet on the trail.

Now his eyes greyed and his jaw set. "But if we've got to eat rabbit," he declared, "we'll have to keep going on it!"

Mr. Bryan nodded. "Anything! Anything! Just so we get the fur out!"

"We'll have to go easy on our provisions," Mickey said, running an estimating eye over the beans, flour and bacon they had on hand. "Grant" he turned to his helper earnestly, "You'll have to see what you can do about keeping the pot boiling." Then, "We'll have to hang on to what bacon we can as long as we can."

Grant nodded, and from then on he tried to see that

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there was a rabbit or a partridge ready for cooking over the camp fire ; but sometimes after a bad day of travelling they had to content themselves with porcupine which, when skinned and roasted, looked tasty enough, but was too rich for their palates while warm. "It's a lot like beaver or pork," Mickey said one evening, when he had left his supper almost untouched, "Hot, they don't appeal to me ; but when they get cold, I can eat them, if I'm hungry enough !"

Mickey had expected to have to chop his way through fallen timber right to the end of steel ; but even he was unprepared for the booming creeks that had to be forded by the horses before the fur could be rafted across, nor for the treacherous muskeg that seemed to promise safety, only to suck the horses into it as they picked their way along.

"Reddy's the lightest. Let him go last," Mickey ordered as they came to one soft spot ; and with Mr. Bryan's saddle horse leading the way the little procession followed Mickey, who went ahead on nimble feet to call back warnings of danger here, or impassibility there, and occasionally the good news that there was a clear road ahead.

The horses seemed to know what was needed of them, and they eased their bodies under the heavy loads of fur, ready for the bad stretch ahead. The first horse picked his way lightly without much difficulty, setting his hoofs on niggerheads and avoiding the soft holes between, the second one tried to follow his example and succeeded for the most part ; but the ones behind began to flounder. Mickey, Grant, and Mr. Bryan called to them encouragingly, and the horses responded to their voices ; but Reddy, try as he would, got caught.

One minute he was walking along, picking his way gingerly behind the others, the next the muskeg was clutching at him, sucking him into its bogginess, while he floundered and threshed in an effort to escape.

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Mickey saw what was happening and started to rush to his aid ; then changed his mind and led the other horses to high ground before he gave the word to go back to Reddy.

"We've got to get the load off him first," he told Grant. "Then we'll have to man-pack it up to high ground before we start getting Reddy out."

Minutes piled up as the men worked to get the fur to safety, and preparations for the rescue went on.

One rope was tied to another until Mickey figured the line would stretch from the dry spot where they stood to the bridle of the sinking horse ; then with a sharp command to Grant to fasten one end to "Colleen," the small bay mare that led his pack train, Mickey went back and fastened the other end to Reddy's halter shank.

"Now, pull !" Mickey ordered, and Grant started Colleen up while Reddy, at the voice of his master, tried to extricate himself from the tentacles of the muskeg-monster that were clutching at him.

"Again !" Mickey called, urging Reddy to put forth some effort and not stay there a dead weight at the end of the line. Reddy struggled, Colleen tried to pull him ; but the muskeg had a grip of iron.

A few more abortive attempts at moving the horse, and the halter shank broke.

Reddy, hearing the snap of steel, lost heart. His head drooped, his eyes lost most of their lustre, and his lips sagged.

"We've got to keep him fighting," Mickey said, his breath coming fast as he tied the rope around the horse's neck. "Come on, get up !" he urged. Reddy put forth one more effort, then turned reproachful eyes upon his master.

"We've got to get you out of here," Mickey said quietly, trying to instil something of his own will into the discouraged horse ; then, raising his voice in command to Grant to get

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Colleen to pulling, he reached for Reddy's ears and urged him up.

But Reddy was too tired to make any effort ; and in a minute Mickey was calling to Grant to stop. " I've got to admit I'm beat ! " he said brokenly, untying the rope from around the horse's neck.

" We can't leave him like that," he said now, " With the mosquitoes pestering him," he indicated the swarm of insects that was making merry at the expense of the helpless animal in the mire. " If he's got to die, we'd better get him out of his misery quick."

He was loading his rifle now ; and as he looked at the cartridges he wondered how soon they would get to camp, and whether one cartridge spent now might not mean hunger for all of them later. For a short second he stayed his hand ; then he glanced at Reddy, deep in the muskeg, the white blaze on his face red with blood beneath the dark cloud of mosquitoes and flies, and he slipped the cartridge into place.

A shot rang out, and hard upon it he could hear his voice saying, " You haven't been riding much anyway, Mr. Bryan. I guess it'll be all right if we put Reddy's load on to your horse."

Grant Owen hoped they would get a partridge for supper that night. There was something about roasting a partridge over a camp fire that thawed a person's heart out ; and he was sure Mickey's needed thawing that night. But there wasn't a partridge to be seen, and the best they could do was a pan of fried porcupine.

" Well, there goes the last of the bacon ! " Mickey commented that night. " From now on we'll have to do without fried stuff."

The dry food stuck in Mickey's throat ; but whether it was lack of tea to wash it down, or regret for Reddy in the muskeg, he did not know.

" Pretty slow going," Mickey would pant apologetically

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to Mr. Bryan every once in a while ; and Mr. Bryan would nod in answer ; but neither man spoke of giving up or going forward without the heavy furs. To Mr. Bryan their loss would mean bankruptcy. To Mickey, while their safe delivery meant money for feed and provisions for the return journey and a margin left over for profit, it meant much more in the successful completion of a contract he had undertaken.

He was determined to keep going, even though men and horses were already gaunt from hardships and short rations.

One horse after another got sucked into the the muskeg ; but Mickey had learned now to keep the horse threshing for freedom with loud cries of encouragement and the cracking of a whip until they could get a line to him from dry ground and pull him out before the muskeg got too firm a hold on him ; so that he still had six horses in his train when they came in sight of steel.

Steel ! It meant food to eat. And tea to drink ! And a bed ! And rest !

The railroad gang dropped their work on the roadbed and took their horses from them. " We'll look after them for you," they said, taking in at a glance the exhausted condition of their visitors.

The cook had boiling coffee ready.

There were beds with pillows.

And the three men ate, drank and slept.

" How much do I owe you, Mickey ? " That was Mr. Bryan, two days later, when his train was ready to pull out with his fur, bone-dry.

" I gave you my price when we started out," Mickey said evenly. " It's still the same."

" That was before the storm," Mr. Bryan protested, thinking of the way they had had to hew a path through that part of the trail where they did not have to flounder in muskeg or ford the swollen creeks that ran bank-high and swift after the rain.

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But Mickey was firm. "A bargain's a bargain," he declared, "I gave you my price. That's the price it is."

"Nonsense!" Mr. Bryan pressed a double fee into Mickey's hand, and when he protested, Mr. Bryan laid his hand on his shoulder to quieten him. "I'd have sold out pretty cheap when that storm came up," he said. There was a pause while he tried to find words in which to couch his gratitude. Then he said simply, "If there's ever anything I can do for you, just let me know. For there's nothing I wouldn't do for you, as you certainly saved the day for me." He shook Mickey's hand warmly before turning away to climb aboard the train for the outside.

Mickey looked at the money in his hand before pocketing it. A feeling of elation swept over him, drowning out all remembrance of the hardships of the trip he had just made, as he figured that now he could buy a horse to replace Reddy, maybe add another horse to his train, and if Luck stayed with him and he got enough work during the coming summer, then he and Pat could start some kind of business in McMurray. . . Maybe in time they'd . . .

He was off then, day-dreaming again about the road above the Rapids.

4

IT was almost a week before Mickey and Grant saddled up the horses and headed for McMurray; and not until Mickey was astride his sorrel did he mention the pain that had been striking at him with annoying frequency for some time.

Now he said, "You'd better take the lead, Grant," his voice was very low, "I'll trail along behind." Then in answer to Grant's questioning look, he added, "I've got a terrible pain shooting down my chest." His face

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twisted as he spoke. "You go ahead," he ordered, "but keep looking back, will you, as I don't know how far I can go." His voice was pain-wracked.

They moved forward then, and Grant kept looking back uneasily, but Mickey kept motioning to him to keep going; until when they were ten miles from the end of steel, at a fork in the trail, Mickey motioned to Grant to take the path that led into Christina Lake, rather than the one towards home. Grant waited for him to ride up. "How are you?" he asked anxiously.

"The pains are not getting any less or any better," Mickey said through tight lips. Then, "I understand there are some Indians in to Christina Lake. We'd better pull in there. They've got good feeding ground for the horses," he said quietly, "and if I'm going to be laid up for a day or two, the horses might as well eat well, anyway."

Mickey was grey-white now under his tan, and his eyes were robbed of most of their blueness by the pain that stabbed at him with vicious jabbings. So that both Grant and he heaved a sigh of relief when they came within sight of the camping site on the banks of the Christina River. A trickle of smoke issued out of the flap of every time-stained teepee, for already the mosquitoes must be smudged out with a smouldering fire of rotten wood and moss. Fat, well-fed horses were hobbled nearby, and lean dogs were nosing around among the teepees in the hope of finding something to eat; for now that their hauling season was over they got no feed. Not until winter returned would they be fed again, for the Indian has no affection for his dogs, and feeds them only when he must in order to get work out of them. Occasionally they stopped in their search for food to lift a leg beside a teepee, for while a man must walk a hundred steps from the camp door, the dogs have no such rule.

Past the high stages, loaded with saddle blankets and supplies to keep them from the hungry dogs that would

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devour anything, up to the largest teepee, they came, before Mickey reined his horse to a standstill, let himself heavily to the ground, and spoke haltingly in Cree to a group of young Indians who came to meet him.

"Give him," he nodded towards Grant, "a hand with the horses," he told them; and when their Chief, Whit-co-pan, came forward with slow dignity, he explained that sickness had struck him on the trail.

The chief did not wait for him to explain any further. "You come to my teepee," he invited, "I have a bed there." He led the way to the grimy canvas teepee that was his home, and pulling the flap aside, motioned to Mickey to enter.

"Kee-chee-moguman," he said, introducing Mickey to his wife. "Very sick," he explained, and she pointed to the bed. "You lie there," she told him, and Mickey reached for the iron bedstead and propped himself against it for a moment, before easing himself down on the soft mattress.

He closed his eyes heavily against the pain, and when he opened them, his hostess was standing by the bedside, regarding him consideringly, her brown face wrinkled with concern, her dark eyes troubled and sympathetic.

"Kee-chee-moguman, I know what is wrong," she told him, plucking anxiously at her calico dress with work-toughened hands. Then tossing her two grey braids of hair, she said resolutely, "I will make you some medicine."

"That'll be nice," Mickey was writhing in agony. "That'll be fine," he told her, and she went out, her moccasined feet making only a little noise as she moved across the spruce-bough carpet that covered the floor.

In a little while she was back, carrying in her arms a bundle of roots which she had gathered from the swamps and muskeg.

While Mickey watched, she dropped them all by the fire in the centre of the teepee, then moved to one side

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where a rusty lard pail lay on its side. Picking it up she carried it over and set it down beside the heap of roots, pulled up a low seat, and taking a short, sharp knife in her hand, she set to work. Every root had to be split and inspected; and when she found a little dark speck she would scrape it out with the point of the knife into the pail.

Mickey watched her out of the corner of his eye whenever the pain would permit him to take an interest in what was going on in the large teepee. Now she picked up the pail, shook the contents around, eyeing it calculatingly; decided there was enough for her purpose, and with a look of satisfaction moved over to a pail of water that stood near the entrance to the teepee.

"This is good water," she told him. "It come from the river. The Indian never drinks like the white man from a well. Always from the river." She dipped a cupful of water into the lard pail, and set it on the fire to boil.

Carefully she stirred it as it simmered, and as soon as it struck into a boil she poured it into a heavy white cup and handed it to Mickey. "After you have drunk it," she told him solemnly, "you will break out in a sweat, with water pouring all over you. But don't worry about that. A little longer after that and you will feel better."

Mickey eyed the rusty lard pail the water had been boiled in with some distaste, and his stomach refused to accept the liquid. He was about to thrust it back at her, but when his eyes met the dark brown ones above him, he began to sip at it.

Pain seared him and a strong hand snatched the cup from him, holding it until the spasm had passed, then gave it back with, "You drink; you feel better." There was matriarchal authority in the quiet voice.

Mickey drank it quickly.

"It tastes like muskeg water," he panted with difficulty.

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The wrinkled mahogany face above him spread into a grin. "Just like that," she agreed.

Mickey had taken the drink because it had seemed ungracious to refuse it flatly when his hostess had gone to so much trouble, searching through the muskeg and swamps for the roots she wanted, and preparing the medicine in the rusty pail ; but he had expected no relief from it.

Now, with his body perspiring, he could not help but feel that maybe the old lady knew her medicine.

"You sweat. That good," she commented, eyeing him with satisfaction.

Mickey slept soon after that ; and when he woke up the pain had gone, leaving behind a dull soreness that cleared up in a few days.

"I feel fine," he told Whit-co-pan and his wife, as they gathered around the common pot for supper one evening. Whit-co-pan grunted his satisfaction at the news. His wife, however, beamed her pleasure. She pawed into the pot and brought out a hunk of meat which she bit into with strong yellow teeth. Then with a sharp knife she hacked at the free end of the meat, avoiding her lips by what seemed to Mickey like a miracle, leaving herself with a good-sized mouthful on which to chew meditatively before saying, "You did not have so much faith in my medicine though," she chuckled, "You not like so much to take." Her brown eyes danced.

Mickey admitted his reluctance with a nod of his head, and she went on to say "The white men always think our medicine no good, but we *know* !" She took another bite off the piece of meat she was holding, then, "You will stay with us some more days until you get your strength again," she told him firmly.

He nodded.

"It's an ideal spot to recuperate in," Grant said to Mickey as they sat on the river bank together. "All this," he waved a hand that took in the water, the birch-bark

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canoes, the floats that marked the spots where the nets were set, the little groups of women busy repairing nets on the bank, and the picturesque teepees that nestled among the dark trees . . . It's like something you dream about."

"Yes," Mickey agreed ; then called Whit-co-pan over to him so that they could continue their dickering ; for Mickey was determined to take another horse back with him to add to his train.

"You would like to take my horses," Whit-co-pan said, fingering his red neckerchief. Then, his eyes creased at the corners, "And I," he declared, "Would like to take some of yours," he chuckled. "We will see."

Every day they would spend most of the daylight hours bargaining and trading, while Whit-co-pan's wife would chide them with, "How can you keep track of who owns what horses, with every day you trading back and forth like that," until when they were ready to leave Mickey had traded one of his horses for one of the camp horses, and in addition had bought two of the chief's best horses to add to his train.

"I feel fine ! I feel wonderful !" he said to Grant as they headed for McMurray. "Just watch Pat's face when he sees me home with an extra horse !" he exulted.

But when Pat saw them coming he had no eyes for the horses in the train. All he could see was Mickey. "You've been gone so long," he said, "I was afraid maybe you were never coming !"

Mickey threw his arm around him, pulling his ear closer. "What did you think might have happened to me ?" he made his tone scoffing ; but Pat's eyes were running over the horses now. "What happened to Reddy ?" he wanted to know.

"Got lost in the muskeg," Mickey said, turning away.

Pat watched him quietly, yearningly. "Lost in the muskeg," he muttered, and shuddered, knowing that the

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muskeg can claim a human sacrifice as eagerly as it will reach out for a horse.

* * * *

Mickey Ryan now had seven horses in his transport, and suddenly the older men of McMurray began to notice him . . . and envy him.

"With seven horses, he's in a position where he could take on a fair-sized job of packing if it came along," they'd say consideringly; then sit down to have a drink and talk over what ought to be done about the young Ryan lad.

"He ought to be in the war," they'd say over and over. "After all this is the year nineteen hundred and sixteen. There's a war on. He's young. He ought to be in it." They would scratch their grizzled heads then consideringly. "Sure, the authorities have turned him down," they'd admit, "But a fellow that can get around the way he can, *ought to go!*"

They got so they hinted around the subject whenever Mickey was among them. "A young fellow ought to do his bit," they'd say over their drinks, with eyes averted; and Mickey who had wanted through the long years of the war to be a part of it, could only say "A fellow might want to; but if they won't take him, well, they won't!" and he would stride off into the dark night, his eyes grey with anguish and his hands clenched. Only Pat knew how he felt; for Pat often said, "I feel bad about not being able to go; but then I never thought they'd be able to take me." He would stop and eye the well-knit figure of his brother consideringly, "But a fellow like Mick, he thinks he's a hundred per cent. He's sure he'll get took. Then they say 'no.' Well, it kind of knocks something out of you."

Another horse was added to the transport within the month and the Grey Heads gathered together again. "He don't drink and he don't smoke. He ain't married.

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He's got nothing to spend his money on," they complained, "He's got nothing to do but get ahead."

"He's getting ahead too fast," one of the men said slowly. "I like to see a man get ahead," he shook his head, "but not too fast. Not too fast!" He tossed off a drink, wiped his moustache with his hand, and continued, "It isn't good for a young fellow to get ahead fast," he told them. "He should make progress slow . . . be prepared for bad times, like we always get."

A little man with beady eyes at the end of the table spoke up then, "Tain't fair for him, an outsider, to come up here and steal the bread and butter out of our mouths," he orated. "Damn Yankee, that's what he is!" He got to his feet and lifting his glass high as for a toast, "To hell with the Yankee!" he cried, and drank to that.

They all drank with him.

When Mickey heard about it, he laughed.

5

IT wasn't so long after that, when Captain Smalley arrived with the mail from Athabasca. "A man never gets a chance to get any money ahead in this country," he complained. "Look at *me*!" his face twisted wryly. "Work like hell all summer and never make a cent!"

"You've got the Government contract for carrying the mail. It pays you pretty well," they reminded him.

"By the time I hire a pilot for the boat, and an engineer. Then we gotta have a cook, and a handy man to run the boat and——" He was off on a long recital of expenses and then, bitterly, "And now with fellows like Ryan hauling fur and passengers out to the end of steel, that leaves me with nothing but the mail."

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The other men exchanged a long look, full of hidden meaning.

"The first thing you know," one of them said, twirling his moustache carefully, "Ryan'll have the mail contract from you, too."

Smalley's face lit with pleasure for a moment at the thought, then his eyes half closed guardedly as he excused himself and went looking for Mickey Ryan.

The men he left winked hard at each other and poured themselves another drink.

"It's a good night's work we've done, Brothers!" A good night's work!" The man with the beady eyes was jubilant.

"Mickey, how about you taking over my mail contract?" Captain Smalley asked as soon as he had found the Ryan Brothers down at the stable.

Mickey laughed. "You know as well as I do that when the railroad comes in, it'll carry the mail; and then the present contract won't be any good to anyone."

"It may be years before they get the railroad in here," Captain Smalley said without conviction, "You know they've had to give up laying steel, what with the weather, and labour conditions on account of the war, and then the sickness among the horses."

Mickey nodded.

"You could make a good thing out of the mail contract long before the steel gets here," Captain Smalley urged.

"I haven't the money to buy it anyway," Mickey said quietly.

"I wouldn't need much down," Captain Smalley said in a tired voice. Then sitting down on an upturned keg, "I'm getting old, Mickey. I can't stand the racket much longer," he doled the words at Mickey, who busied himself paring at a horse's hoof.

"My boat is worth five thousand dollars," Captain Smalley went on, almost as if he were talking aloud for his own pleasure, "I've got twelve pack horses, and saddles

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worth a hundred dollars apiece." He sat in contemplation for a long time, then spat decisively before saying, "I'll give you the works for three thousand dollars."

Mickey laughed ; and setting the hoof down, turned to put the knife in the farrier's box. Then taking off his leather apron he hung it on a peg, before reaching for his coat. As he struggled into it he turned to Captain Smalley, bubbling with his own joke. "I'll tell you what I'll do, I've got six hundred dollars. I'll give you that down, and the rest when I make it."

His eyes were twinkling his merriment ; but they became suddenly grave as Captain Smalley reached for his hand, and grabbing it, almost sobbed, "I'll take it, Mickey ! It's a deal."

Mickey could feel his hand being shaken, but he was in such a daze that he could find no words, for he had not for a moment thought of having his offer accepted ; and the sight of Captain Smalley's face, twisted with happiness at having made the deal, frightened him. He now owned twenty horses, a boat, and packing equipment ; which ought to have pleased him. But when he thought of the pilot, engineer, cook and handy man who would now be looking to him for wages, he had no room in his heart for pleasure.

"I'll have to start making money right away," he said to himself and Captain Smalley, "When I give you the six hundred dollars, I won't have anything to fall back on."

Captain Smalley slapped his back heartily. "You'll make money," he encouraged him hallowly, "I've always made a living. No reason why you shouldn't !"

The men of McMurray drank that night with the Captain in celebration of the deal he had made ; but Mickey was not with them. He was lying on his narrow bed, making slow, painful calculations dealing with the running of the mail contract from Athabasca to McMurray.

It was well past midnight when he heard two men

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pass under his window ; and as they went by, one said : " I'm glad Smalley's getting the six hundred dollars out of the deal right away."

The other sniggered, " It's all he'll ever get, too. Ryan'll be broke within six months."

Mickey's jaw set and an angry oath sprang from him ; then he went back to his calculations again, " I've got to show them," he told himself. " I've got to."

" I'll have to cut down the staff on the boat to an engineer and myself," he told the other men apologetically.

" You can't do all the work yourself," they reminded him ; but he was adamant.

" My brother'll go out to Willow Lake and make hay to feed the horses. He'll be able to come into McMurray for a couple of days every week and shoe what horses in there need shoeing ; then he'll have to stay at Willow Lake with the horses all winter while I run the mail," he outlined his plan to them.

The men looked at him pityingly. " A city fellow like you can't run mail with dogs the distance between here and Athabasca," they told him. " Sometimes it gets as low as seventy below and——" They could not go on, but their silence painted a picture of frostbite, suffering, and ultimate death.

* * * *

" Well, I'm glad Captain Smalley got that white elephant off his hands before the railroad got here," one of the most portly members of the Board of Trade said, rubbing his hands together gleefully when he thought of his old friend getting six hundred dollars in cash for a business that was already doomed.

But when reports came in that Mickey had cut down on the staff and was running his boat with the help of an engineer, and that he had a young Indian boy to help pack the mail with horses from House River to McMurray, they

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began to figure that with the small overhead he must be making money, and feeling ran hot.

"First thing you know he'll make enough to pay Captain Smalley off what he owes him, and then," there was a dramatic pause, "Then he'll start looking around for something else to make money out of!"

Mr. Potts, who had been an Old Country barrister, stopped all the talk for the time being with: "Wait until he starts hauling the mail with dogs over that long trail, he'll be ready to give up and go home," he predicted.

Mr. Potts came very close to being right.

From the beginning he had trouble with his team. In his inexperience he had bought the handsomest dogs he could buy, only to find that he had paid his money for looks and nothing more. Jasper, who appeared to be the hardest working dog on the team, and who trotted along with tail held high and collar tight, had Mickey convinced for days that he was the best dog he had. But when he felt at the collar, Mickey exploded. "You're not pulling hard enough to pull a setting hen off her nest," he declared wrathfully, and promised himself to get rid of Jasper as soon as he got back to McMurray.

Raynor's feet kept "balling up," and he would drop to his belly to work at his paws trying to rid them of the snow that formed into ice under his tender pads, almost crippling him; so that Mickey was forced to clip the hair from between his toes, then singe it with a candle in order to permit him to travel in comfort.

Then, having been told that a little wolf blood improves a dog for travelling, Mickey invested in a couple of half-breed dogs. Their fine appearance and large feet appealed to him greatly, and he chose them in preference to the small-footed dogs he might have had. For he figured the larger feet of the wolf would be better suited to travelling over the snow and ice. But when he got out on the trail he found that the large wolf-feet were unsuited to

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packed trails and long distances. They were all right for a wolf that could stalk a moose in leisurely manner and lie up during a spell of bad weather ; but where a trail was well beaten, or led across sharp ice, they were useless.

But he had to keep his team for the winter, for as long as the snow remained on the ground there were no sleigh dogs to be bought, and he was forced to carry on as best he could until the warm weather came, when the Indians, with no thought of the next winter, would be glad to part with their best sleigh dogs at a good price.

At first he tried limiting the dogs to one meal a day, on the advice of seasoned travellers ; but he soon found that the dogs were on the point of exhaustion long before night came.

"I'd better feed them at every stop," he said, and it was only then that he found out why men were loath to feed their dogs more than once in the twenty-four hours. For now, after every rest period would come the delays that must come after every feeding time. First one dog would hold up the team, refusing to move until he had left a steaming brown mound behind him on the white snow to mark his passing. Then, as soon as they were all pulling evenly in their traces again, another dog would stop and the team would watch with avid interest until he was ready to "mush" again. And it would be more than twenty minutes before they were ready to settle down to their harness and work until the next camp was reached.

Many times Mickey was tempted to let a rest period go past without feeding the dogs so as to avoid these delays ; but he refused to make things easier for himself by doing so, for he knew that before the winter was over the dogs would need every ounce of strength they could muster.

"Fifty-three below, and with a head wind blowing," old timers would exclaim that year. "I never saw the like before !" Then, "It's not fit for a dog to be out !"

But the mail had to be delivered on time, and Mickey was learning to travel as light as possible, carrying no

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unnecessary equipment and only enough provisions to last himself and his dogs for the scheduled run.

He was learning, too, to guard against Mal-de-Raquette, which is the dread of every Northerner. Tying his snowshoes on with infinite care so that there might be no undue strain on the leg muscles and tendons which might bring on the "snow-shoe sickness" that can mean agony on the trail. Guarding, too, against the even-more dreaded blister that beset the feet of the northern traveller. Watching for its first appearance, when he would take a sharp needle from his kit-bag and puncture it by running the point through the healthy flesh below it. Time and again he had had to limp painfully ahead of his dogs while the lampwick ties of his snowshoes cut unmercifully at a blister that had broken before he could attend to it. Even with care, there were still times when a snowshoe would work itself crooked, and then he would have to resort to the needle if he were not to finish the day out with swollen, agonised feet that would not let him sleep. He hated using the needle. It was an operation he dreaded and wished to avoid. And he worked to avoid it.

Rough ice and crusted snow would cut and lacerate the tender pads of his team, leaving them bleeding and sore, so that he was forced to make camp until they healed, until he learned to put his dogs in mooseskin moccasins at the beginning of a bad stretch ; which meant exercising the utmost speed in taking them off as soon as they halted to make camp, for if the dogs did not keep moving their feet would freeze quickly on account of the lack of circulation induced by the tightly tied strings of babiche that held the moccasins in place.

Twenty tiny moccasins to be untied and removed ; then placed on small sticks in front of the fire so that they might dry out and be ready for the next lap of the journey, seemed quite a chore to Mickey ; but their use meant time saved, and easier travelling.

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"I'll never make another trip," he would tell himself as he shovelled the snow back with his snowshoes and rolled up the logs to form a couch, then laid down a mattress of spruce branches, before changing into dry clothing for the night, and a howl from one of the dogs would tell him that there would be no sleep for him for some time to come. Another howl before Mickey would whistle commandingly and the dog came slinking into camp, his jaws and legs thick with porcupine quills.

Grabbing a pair of pliers, Mickey would set to work to remove them. Every quill had a thousand or more barbs, and with every struggle the dog made against their removal, they worked themselves deeper into the tender flesh.

Mickey worked as fast as he could for he knew their poisonous value. Knew, too, that if they were left in the warm flesh they would swell and poison the part, so that they would be beyond removal.

Then as the last barb was jerked out, another dog would come howling into camp, his jaws pierced by the short quills so that Mickey would be puzzled to know whether to pull them out through the roof of his mouth, or draw them out from above his nose.

"I'll never make another trip!" he would declare a hundred times during every trip; but when he reached McMurray and got himself into dry clothing he would begin to tell about his trip; and rubbing his hands together would say, "It seemed pretty bad out there on the trail; but now that I'm warm and have had the wrinkles taken out of my tummy, why I begin to feel that I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Trip followed trip with only the usual discomforts of the trail and Mickey thought he had learned everything. He knew now why a dog sled was not the same width at the front as at the back, and his sleds measured only fourteen inches at the rear while measuring sixteen inches at the front to make for easier travelling through snow that would bind on an oblong vehicle.

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He had learnt how to get the mail delivered no matter what the weather. When spring came, with occasional stretches of open water to be crossed, he put away the winter sled and used instead a combination scow-sled that moved easily over the snow and ice, yet lent itself to easy paddling when necessary, while the dogs, unhitched and free, would race along the bank or over the ice until Mickey was ready to hitch them up again.

He thought he knew every trick of the trail and how to overcome them, when one dark winter's day he got ready to leave Athabasca Landing with a good-sized load of mail, enough fish and rice to keep the dogs going on the trip (but not an ounce too much), and a well-measured stock of provisions for himself.

"I miss coffee on the trail," he said as he packed. "But I find tea sits better on my stomach, somehow."

"There's cold weather coming up," one of the older Indians warned as he watched him getting ready to pull out. "Plenty cold!" he emphasized, then, "If you stay here for a few days, it will pass."

But Mickey would wait for nothing. He knew the people of McMurray were waiting eagerly for their fortnightly delivery of mail, and he was anxious that they get it on time, if not ahead of schedule.

It was, therefore, a disappointment to him when he and his dogs limped in two days later than he had been expected, to be met by the members of the Fort McMurray Board of Trade, who demanded an explanation for the delay.

"Been cold here?" Mickey asked, a trifle belligerently.

"Seventy-three below," someone said.

"I thought it was cold," Mickey busied himself unloading the bags of mail as he spoke. "I couldn't get a fire to throw off any heat no matter how much wood I burned," he told them.

"What kept you so long?" the sharpest nosed member of the Board of Trade enquired, his eyes narrowing as he spoke.

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Mickey turned on them then. "You bunch of armchair-warmers wouldn't know that you can't get dogs to exert themselves when it's down to seventy-three below." He tried to keep his voice calm. "They just creep along until you've got to make camp. Then when you do make camp you can't get any heat from the fire and you can't get your robe or your blankets warm." He reached for a mail-bag then, "We got pretty short of food, too ; so the dogs didn't have much in their gut to give them any pep." He carried the bag into the post office. "The cold seems to sap their strength," he commented as he came back. "They need twice the food when the thermometer drops, it seems."

"There must have been a poker game at House River," one of the men surmised aloud. Then at Mickey, "Guess that's the reason we didn't get our mail sooner."

Mickey flared then, behind him the memory of endless hours of work with the axe, when he had chopped wood in order to keep himself warm ; and when his food supply had dwindled almost to nothing, and still the cold held, he had had to force his dogs to the trail even though they protested in every way they knew against it.

"The dogs are hungry," he said through tight lips, "and so am I !" He moved about his work quietly and easily for a few moments, ignoring the men who were watching him. Then, with an effort to be friendly, "You seem to eat a lot more on a trail when it gets away down cold. The dogs, too," he said.

But the men were not to be appeased with gentle words. "You're late with the mail," one of them began firmly ; but now Mickey turned on him.

"I'm not late," he declared. "Not according to the contract, 'I'm not.'" He held the words firm against any argument. "I'm later than I usually am," he admitted, but not later than the twelve days the contract allows for."

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"Well, we're going to lay a complaint to the Government . . . to the post office . . . to the . . ."

But Mickey did not let him finish. Straightening up and looking at the six men ranged against him, "I don't know why any of you old mossbacks have to worry about *when* the mail gets in!" He threw the words at them. "All you get in the post is a bunch of bills that you can't pay." He picked up another sack and carried it into the post office.

When he came back the men returned to the attack. "We've got to get our mail on time," they said, almost in concert.

Mickey's hands ached for a chance to finish the argument right here; but he held them back. His tongue was not as easy to control, however, and he lashed out with, "Oh, you're just a bunch of old mossbacks that never have done anything and never will; and you're just trying to make it hard for anyone who wants to do something." He turned away from them contemptuously, and while none of them was anxious to enter into a fist fight, every one of them felt the slight in not being offered one.

They kept their word and wrote to the Government and the post office department, and laid complaints that the mail had been delivered late, suggesting that some arrangements should be made to see that the people of McMurray got their mail on time.

Mickey laughed when copies of the letters were sent to him; and when Pat protested that something should be done about them, Mickey shrugged it off with "They'll get tired of writing pretty soon and find something else to do."

"But Potts," Pat was worried. "He's an Old Country lawyer, he writes a pretty good letter. Sounds like he knew a lot." There was grave anxiety in the deep voice.

"Oh, Potts is a nice fellow," Mickey soothed. "He wouldn't harm a kitten intentionally. It's just that those others have him sold on the idea that I'm going to ruin the country, getting ahead so fast."

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The words "Getting ahead so fast" seemed to be the only ones Pat heard and registered, and he used them in his letters home to Indiana.

"Mick's doing well," he said, enclosing a money order for fifty dollars to prove it. "Tell the folks back home he's got a lot of plans for next year, and give them all our love."

But while Mickey told Pat all about his plans for the next year, he never told him how his heart hankered after the sixteen mile trail above the Rapids; how at night when the moon looked down on his camp among the spruce and the Northern Lights tried out a new ballet for his benefit, he would dream of a road across the portage; a road that grew to a highway; a highway that smoothed into a city street; and along and over it passed bags of mail, bales of fur, silver and gold; and people came and went in droves across it.

No, that wasn't a dream to tell anyone. For while everyone admitted the portage was the doorway to the North, their belief was that it must perforce remain barred.

"With the heavy rains we get here in the summer, and the bad winters we have, and no gravel to build with, there'll never be a good road through there!"

6

"I'VE just put my feet under the table," Mickey said in his friendliest voice as Mr. Bryan came into the dining room of the hotel at McMurray, motioning to him to take the seat across from him.

Mr. Bryan seated himself, a worried frown creasing his forehead, "I might as well eat," he said resignedly, "But I don't feel much like it." There was a pause, then, "I've just got a telegram," he sifted the words out slowly.

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Mickey's eyes greyed with sympathy. "Bad news?" he enquired.

"Could be the best news I've ever had," Mr. Bryan said in a flat voice, "But if I don't get to New York in time for a meeting they're having, there'll be no news."

"What're you worrying about then?" Mickey asked cheerfully, "You have plenty of time to catch the train to Edmonton; and if it gets there on schedule——"

"You know that Muskeg Special," Mr. Bryan cut him short, "I could get on it all right. But how can it be kept on the track?"

"Oh, on any skeleton track a train gets off lots; but they get it back on pretty fast, with everyone pitching in to help."

"But if we get caught in a snowstorm," Mr. Bryan said gloomily. "We could be held up for two weeks with a good fall of snow." He turned his head and peered through the small window of the hotel anxiously, "And it looks to me like snow," he opined.

"It *looks* like snow," Mickey admitted. "But you know how snow *is*; sometimes it threatens for quite a while before it starts falling."

Mr. Bryan let out a hearty chuckle. "You'll never get over your optimism, will you, Mick?" he asked. Then an alert look came over his face, "Why not you take me to Athabasca Landing with the dogs?" he asked eagerly.

Mickey paused to break a cracker into his soup before making any comment, then, "Maybe if you go on the train," he spooned at his soup as he spoke, "Maybe that way you'd have less trouble than with me. Every time you have to travel with me, or be in my company, something happens; and always it's trouble!"

Mr. Bryan laughed. "I'll never know whether I was more scared the time we had the windstorm, or whether that time you took me out to the gravel pit at Mile 197 with my fur, wasn't the worst!"

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Mickey grinned, remembering their disappointment when they had reached the end of the steel, only to find the place forsaken.

"The boarding cars! Everything is gone!" Mr. Bryan had exclaimed, his body sagging with disappointment after the weary trudge through the muskeg with a year's furs for New York.

"They've pulled up stakes," Mickey said unbelievably, looking around, searching with keen blue eyes for some sign of life that would reassure him that their trip had not been for nothing; but the only apparent movement was from three Indian dogs that were scavenging on the spot where the boarding cars had been.

"We've got to go on to Lac la Biche," Mr. Bryan's voice was full of urgency, thinking of the fur that represented all he owned.

"Yes, I suppose we've got to," Mickey said, but his words were freighted with reluctance, for the pack horses would be needed back at McMurray to take care of the mail and the hauling of freight and passengers between there and House River.

"Well, I guess we'll have to look around for a decent place to camp," he said quietly, avoiding the eyes of both his assistant and Mr. Bryan.

He moved down a little way from them then, looking for a sheltered spot, and as his eyes fell on a push-car, that had been left on the tracks, he called out excitedly, "They've left a push-car that they forgot to take, I guess. Look!"

The others came up slowly, with Mr. Bryan asking: "Why so stirred up about a push-car, when what we need is an engine and cars?"

Mickey's words tumbled all over themselves as he told them of his plan. "I'll make a frame with some light poles." He turned to Grant Owens who was listening lazily as he outlined what he was going to do. "You, Grant," he said, "will chop down a few jack pine." He

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spoke now almost as if to himself. "Then we'll fasten a frame on top of the push-car and——"

He straightened suddenly. "I know how it's going to look," he said with certainty, and they made camp.

Next morning they got busy building the frame, on which Mickey piled the precious fur.

"Now we'll make it as much like a wagon as I know how." He rang a long jack pine pile across the front of his load.

"Gather me up what hay wire you can find around here," he told Grant, nodding towards the refuse that was lying around where the camp site had been.

While Grant was busy, Mickey was preparing a couple of light birch poles to serve as singletrees; and when the hay wire was brought to him he soon attached them at either end of the makeshift whiffletree.

Grant was entering into the game readily now; but he stopped working suddenly, all the vim gone from him. "What'll you do for harness?" he enquired dully.

"I'll contrive a set from some rope," Mickey promised, and soon they were hitching two of the horses to their "shifter," one on one side of the track and one on the other.

Mickey started them up. They pulled evenly and eagerly; and as soon as the push-car began to move, he called them to a halt. "You take the other horses and go on home," he told Grant. "You know what has to be done," he said, issuing no further order. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he called, then clicked to the horses and started moving towards Lac la Biche.

The first few miles encouraged them to think the trip might be easy, for the horses moved along on either side of the track, as if they had been born to this kind of travel; but as soon as they came to a bridge spanning a goodsized creek, Mr. Bryan called out in dismay. The track was narrow, and there was no firm path on either side on which the horses could tread, and the series of poles supporting the steel rails had never been designed for horse travel.

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"What're we going to do now?" Mr. Bryan's voice was flooded with hopelessness.

"Swim the horses across the creek," Mickey said calmly, "then come back and push the car across." He eyed his companion's immaculate grey suit and tan shoes considerably, and he seemed to hesitate. Then his eyes lifted to the strong face, with its powerful jaw and well-marked brows. "You'll have to help me," he told him.

"I'll help all I can," the ready promise came. Then doubtfully, "but all this hitching and unhitching, won't it take time?"

"It'll take time," Mickey said, "but if we want to get the fur to Lac la Biche, we'll have to do it."

Mr. Bryan got out and pushed.

Having encouraged them this far, the country now turned against them. The tracks seemed to be laid in swamps, with only occasionally stretches of ground on which the horses could walk, so that the men had to unhitch them and take them along wide detours of three and four miles to cover a mile of track; then walk back and push the car up to the place where they had the team waiting.

More than once Mr. Bryan was ready to call "Quit," but Mickey always came back with "Never say 'Whoa' in a bad place!" and they would keep going.

"If you could make it that time with the horses," Mr. Bryan was saying, "you could make it now with dogs."

"If it was to come up to snow," Mickey objected, "I couldn't make it."

"I'd bank on you making it, even if it was to snow," Mr. Bryan declared.

"If it was to turn cold all of a sudden, *no one* could make the dogs go at any speed," Mickey said quietly, "And there's all of a dozen other things that could hold us up. If the dogs took sick, or——"

"I'll take any *chance* on you getting there," Mr. Bryan slapped the words down in front of him. Then, pleadingly,

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"This is my big opportunity, Mickey," he said. "I'm willing to gamble all I have on getting there. If I lose——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't like being put on a spot like this," Mickey said, squirming. "Too many times we've been out together and run into trouble. It seems like we can't expect anything but trouble, *together*!"

"But we always got to where we were going, didn't we?" Mr. Bryan demanded.

Mickey nodded.

"You *will* come?" Mr. Bryan reached out and put a hand on Mickey's shoulder. "You wouldn't see me stuck, would you?" he pleaded, as Mickey still hesitated.

"There are other fellows might be glad to take you," Mickey pointed out.

"I wouldn't take a chance on them." Mr. Bryan brushed the suggestion aside. "It's too important to me to take any risk." He paused, then said quietly. "You can get around any obstacles that might come up. I know that."

"All right," Mickey promised reluctantly. Then, plunging into the undertaking. "We better get on our way as fast as we can. Remember there's two hundred and fifty miles to be covered."

"You get the dogs, and I'll get the grub pile ready," Mr. Bryan's voice was brisk and full of optimism; but when they were fifteen miles out on the trail and it began to snow, the optimism oozed out of him. "Maybe we'd better give in now," he said as Mickey pulled up and made a temporary camp where they could rest the dogs and make themselves some hot tea.

Mickey could see that worry was nagging at the big man badly. "I want to do what you think best," he said quietly . . . "but me . . . I hate to turn back once I've started anything; and, anyway," his voice lifted, "we may run out of this snowstorm in twenty miles or so."

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"I'll take a chance on you," Mr. Bryan said quietly. "And I'll leave it to you. Go on or turn back." He stood waiting, while Mickey looked at the falling snow, sipping his tea meditatively, then said, "We'll go on."

A few minutes later the dogs were hitched up, Mr. Bryan was back in the cariole, and Mickey called to the team to start. They responded unwillingly to his voice and Mickey pressed them on even though they had conveyed their uneasiness to him, and he wondered whether he should not make camp for the night.

"I'll keep going for three hours anyway," he told himself as he ran along ahead of the dogs, calling to them and coaxing them to keep going. But shortly before the three hours' trudge was finished, they had come through the snowstorm, and when he stopped to build a fire and make tea Mr. Bryan was full of hope.

"If I put through this deal that I expect to put through, I'll be on Easy Street," he bragged.

Mickey set out a few dried fish to thaw in front of the blazing fire, feeling at them frequently while the dogs followed every movement with greedy eyes. "Here!" he called as soon as they were limber, and began to distribute them among the team.

"Do you feed your dogs *every* stop?" Mr. Bryan asked in surprise.

"Sure," Mickey said laconically, "You can't get any work out of a dog if he has nothing inside him to get steam up with."

"But I thought——" Mr. Bryan began.

Mickey's face was serious. "All the fellows up here, they say you should feed a dog only once a day." Mr. Bryan nodded. "How would you like to travel all day on one meal?" he asked.

"It must cost you a lot for dog feed," Mr. Bryan demurred.

"Sure it costs me a lot. It costs anyone a lot to feed dogs in the North. Costs too much," Mickey grumbled. Then, resolutely, "but I figure you've got to keep your

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dogs in the pink of condition in *case* you need them to do a big job, and then when they're on the job you've got to feed them to get the work out of them."

"They're all good dogs," Mr. Bryan admitted, running his eyes over their well-furred coats, bright eyes and sturdy legs.

"They were good dogs to start with," Mickey's voice was full of pride. "I keep them up as well as I know how."

"What time do you think we'll get in to Athabasca Landing?" Mr. Bryan wanted to know.

"It's a long way there yet," Mickey laughed. "You just get into the cariole and go back to sleep, and by the next time we make camp we'll be a lot nearer there, I hope."

Ninety miles without a wink of sleep, Mickey travelled, then tumbled into a bed in House River for a short rest before starting up the Athabasca River, which would take them in to the landing.

The world lay bitter-still in the silver moonlight as Mickey guided his team around the high hummocks of ice up through the Pelican Rapids, and he could hear wolves howling hungrily into the wintry whiteness.

"Whooooooooooooo!"

The dogs heard and would gladly have turned tail, but Mickey kept urging them on and cracking the whip over them to keep them going, for they were now going through a canyon, with high limestone walls, forcing him to remain on the river bed; and if he were to be safe from the wolves he must find wood with which to light a fire, for he had no other weapon against them.

"Whoooooooooooo!" The howl was megaphoned down through the canyon and the dogs slunk down on their bellies in terror.

"Come on," Mickey coaxed, "we've got to get out of here!" he told them; and suddenly they seemed to understand that there was no hope for them there, and they went with him, nervously and fearfully enough, but they went.

At the edge of the canyon Mickey knew there was a

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clump of spruce trees, and he would have no difficulty in getting dry wood for a fire ; but would he be able to reach it ?

The howling seemed very close to him ; but he tried to tell himself that there was no danger, although his tongue was now so swollen with fear that he could not call to the dogs any more, and he had to depend upon the whip to keep them moving.

He could see the spruce now, dark in the silver moonlight ; but he could see something else, too. Seven wolves stood upon the ice, waiting for him ; their lean, grey bodies crying out for food and the taste of blood.

He cracked the whip and headed the dogs for the spruce. They needed no urging. He kept facing the wolves as he moved, cracking the whip, and wondering desperately how he could get rid of them.

They stood there, defiantly ; waiting ; sure of themselves ; gloating over their victims.

Still cracking the whip with one hand, and keeping his eyes on them, Mickey took a few pieces of birch-bark from the holdall of the cariole, and gathering a few pieces of dry wood together, started a fire. The blaze "took" quickly, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Now he was safe !

The wolves howled on hungrily ; and it was a call to their brothers to join them, for prey was in sight, and Mickey could well believe the stories the Indians tell of the wolves, who in bad times, will band together and share the taste and smell of their kill among all within hearing of the hunger-cry.

Mickey shuddered as he pulled up another piece of wood for the fire.

And now Mr. Bryan was awake. "How long are we going to stay here ?" he asked, pushing aside the caribou robes and climbing out of the cariole.

"If you're travelling with me," Mickey told him in a somewhat thick voice, "you'll have to stay until daylight." Then, "Take a look at the wolves !" he ordered, pointing

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to his foe, who seemed to be gathered in conference to decide what action should be taken by them, now that the coveted prey had armed himself with that most dreaded of weapons . . . fire. For the moment he had them foiled.

As Mr. Bryan looked, the wolves trotted off down the river.

"They've gone," he said cheerfully.

"Wolves can go," Mickey said, "but they can come back, too." He threw another stick on the fire and watched the flames lick at it greedily. "I'm not moving out of here until daylight," he declared. "I haven't got a gun or anything for protection," he explained, moving to unload for the night. "All I've got is a dog-whip; and I don't relish going out against seven wolves with that."

"I've got a revolver in my grip, in the back of the cariole," Mr. Bryan said eagerly, and Mickey waited impatiently while he unlocked the brown leather bag, then fished through it before bringing out a black revolver.

"Here, take this!" he handed over the revolver and Mickey took it. "There are plenty of shells here," he added. Mickey inspected them, then turned his attention to the revolver.

"You've got to be careful up here," Mickey said apologetically as he tested the trigger. "Having been in the warm room at the hotel, it might have got frost in it out here."

"I know," Mr. Bryan nodded, "so many of the newcomers get into trouble that way. They keep their guns in the house; then take them out where it's frosty and they jam."

"Well, this is all right," Mickey declared as he finished testing the revolver. Then, "As soon as the dogs are rested and we've had something to eat, we'll pull out."

But the dogs could not rest with the silver eye of the moon winking at them, and they howled at it madly. The younger dogs starting with the short howl that was clear indication of their youth, followed up by the older

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ones who cried their age by the length of their howl, until the lead dog, oldest of them all, brought out his lengthy wail, when they would start all over again.

"Next stop the gas well!" Mickey said, as they pulled out, glad that there would be no need to build a fire at that resting place; all he would have to do would be to fill his kettle with water and set it on the gas jet and in five minutes he would have it boiling.

"If only we could figure out a way to pipe this gas out to the south," Mr. Bryan mused, "we could make a fortune."

Mickey laughed, and called above the roar of the gas, "I thought you were on the verge of making your fortune if I got you off to New York in time," he said.

Mr. Bryan nodded. "Looks like we're going to make it." He came closer to Mickey now. "If I make my fortune, Mickey, don't forget I want you to share in it."

Mickey laughed again. "My father was always on the verge of making a million," he said, quietly amused. "I got used to planning for millions when I was four." He threw a fish to each of the dogs. "I was shooing flies off of the horses in my father's blacksmith shop then, with a switch made out of an old broom handle and a horse's tail," he told Mr. Bryan, "and my father was figuring how he'd make a million out of hogs. He went into hogs and lost his shirt." Mickey chuckled. "He pretty nearly lost his blacksmith shop, too." He sobered, remembering the lean days when John Ryan was paying off the mortgage, out of what could be spared when his large family was clothed and fed, from the profit made on shoeing horses at a dollar a set. "I learned young, not to expect an easy living," he said soberly, and moved back to the provision box to bring out tea and hardtack.

Then, "I guess we'll spend the night here," he figured, "but even though we'll be warm and not have to worry about keeping a fire going, I'll miss a tree over my head."

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His eyes swept the small treeless space around the gas well. "But I guess we can't have everything at once," he yawned.

Mickey was proud of making the seventy miles from there to Colin River in twelve hours. "We had good travelling, he said quietly, but there was pride in his voice, too. Pride for his dogs at having done so well, and a little pride in himself.

"We'll sleep here," he said then. "We're only fifty miles away from Athabasca Landing ; and if we leave to-morrow morning by six o'clock, that gives us twenty-four hours to catch the train. We should be able to make it in that time."

"Whatever you want to do, Mickey, is all right with me," Mr. Bryan said.

They were fifteen hours on the trail before the huddle of buildings that was Athabasca Landing came into sight.

"We made it ! We made it !" Mr. Bryan cried as they drew up in front of the ugly brick hotel. "I knew you'd make it," he said then to Mickey.

"I wasn't so sure," Mickey grinned, "when I was in the canyon facing the wolves !"

Mr. Bryan slapped his friend's shoulder. "Around about that time I was feeling a bit nervous myself," he admitted.

"Now," Mickey straightened, "I want to get the dogs a good feed of beef, then I'll have something to eat, take a bath and get myself to bed." There was a pause ; then, apologetically, "I may not be up to see you off," he held out his hand, "I'm likely to sleep the clock around after this trip."

Mr. Bryan shook hands warmly. "I'll leave my cheque with the clerk," he said, "and thanks for everything, Mickey !" His voice was husky. "And remember if things go the way I'm expecting, I'll be able to throw something your way."

Mickey chuckled, with the same indulgence he was used to giving his father when he thought up one of his wild schemes for putting the family on Easy Street. Mr.

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Bryan was a lone buyer of fur in the North. He might get a good year or two ; but no one had ever lasted long up there in that game.

They shook hands again. "Well, the best of luck anyway," Mickey said, and wondered whether he would ever see Mr. Bryan again. And if he did see him, what would the circumstances be ?

"Plenty difficulty, I'll bet !" he told himself.

7

SPRING came at last ; and Mickey was glad to see the end of winter, with its blizzards and sudden drops in temperature.

Passing months had not erased the memory of the frightful trip when it was so cold his dogs refused to take to the trail and he had been forced to chop down small poplars as bait for bush rabbits with which to feed himself and his team. Using his moccasin strings for snares, he had set them by the fallen poplars, then tramped off in the hope of herding his prey into the running nooses, only to find that the cold had discouraged them from hopping around after food, and only a few were venturing out.

Nor had he forgotten the nights in camp when the snow fell into the fire, giving off a sharp hissing sound that fell on his ears with irritating monotony, broken only by the hoot-hoot of a lonely owl. On nights like that he would sit by the fire and whittle at a piece of wood, or play with the dogs, and promise himself that he would never go out on the trail again.

But when spring came, driving the snow before it, and the rivers and lakes broke up so that the mail could be carried by boat from Athabasca Landing to House River

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then packed on horses from there to Fort McMurray, it did not give him any vacation from trouble.

The Horse Creek had to be forded three times, and while the mail was packed in waterproof sacks, there was a metal lock on each sack, which kept it from being completely waterproof, and in addition the horses, stung beyond endurance by the bull-dog flies, would occasionally break from the train and dash madly into the bush to escape their attacks, scraping their packs as they went and oftentimes getting them gashed and slashed as they passed a dagger-pointed branch that refused to bend before them.

Mickey would herd them back on the trail, but when they came to the creek again and started to swim across, the water would find it easy to seep through to the letters in the pack.

This brought bitter complaints from the people of McMurray, who had no conception of the difficulties entailed in bringing mail across the muskeg and over the creeks, and they sent lengthy petitions to the Post Master demanding that a new carrier be appointed so that their letters might be delivered in good condition, instead of arriving with water-stained envelopes, and sometimes, almost undecipherable addresses.

The people of McMurray had much to grumble about now. With the war on, and a shortage of men, they had no Mounted Policemen to keep order in that region, and the Province supplied a Provincial Policeman who had none of the experience or guidance that went with the Mounted Police Force. Everyone realised that it was a makeshift arrangement, and they were forced to accept the situation ; but they found it a galling one. Especially when treaty-time came and all the Indians began to arrive with their families and tom-toms to collect the five dollars apiece that was the yearly gift of their Great White Father in England, and there was no Mounted Policeman in scarlet coat to stand guard over the tea-dances and gambling games that were a part of treaty-time.

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Mr. Conroy, the Indian Agent, came to Mickey as he was leaving for Athabasca Landing to get the mail that would bring the crisp dollar and two dollar bills that would be paid over to every Indian—man, woman and child, in the district.

"What'll we do, Mickey?" he asked. "We're supposed to have a Mounted Policeman come along with the money to guard it. They're all at the war," he said. "What'll we do now?"

Mickey grinned. "Well, if they're off fighting a war, they can hardly be here, can they?" His eyes twinkled.

"It's a Federal affair; so it's not rightly the business of the Provincial Police to take the treaty money in. What do you think we should do?" his voice nudged at Mickey.

For a moment Mickey did not think. He just poured expletives all over the place, pointing out that the Provincial Policeman had had no experience in travelling over that muskeg country; finishing up with, "I've got as much as I can handle with the horses and Indian boy, without borrowing trouble by taking the Provincial Police along, too."

The Indian Agent soothed Mickey down with, "Well, there's nothing in the law says you have to take him; so I guess it'll be all right not to." Then, his face grave, "But you will take care of the money, won't you?"

Mickey walked off with an exasperated nod, and headed for Athabasca Landing to pick up the mail and the treaty money.

When he got it as far as House River and started to load it on the horses, he began to feel his first qualm.

He was not afraid of being held up on the trail and having the treaty money taken from him at the point of a revolver; but if the sack should become gored in the bush and then get water-soaked, the money might look a little less than a king's gift. The bills should be clean, crisp and uncrumpled; without thumb-mark or stain. The Indian Agent could not make a ceremony of handing

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over maculated money in the name of his sovereign. And the Indians might refuse to take it.

For a moment Mickey swore angrily at himself for having taken on the responsibility for the safe delivery of the treaty money, when he might have foisted it on to the Provincial Policeman.

Then he ran an estimating eye over the horses in his train, his glance finally settling with satisfaction on an apron-blazed horse that swam high and strong, and he gave him the precious sack as a top-pack, the two side packs being part of the regular mail.

They crossed Horse Creek the first time without trouble. Then settled down to getting over the muskeg between there and the next crossing, with Mickey keeping an ever-watchful eye on the movements of the big horse under the treaty money.

Two days out of House River they came to the second crossing of Horse Creek, and as they entered the narrow approach, Mickey eyed the creek doubtfully. The water was running high and swift between the towering banks and the horses must swim almost straight across the two hundred feet to the other side if they were to enter the avenue that Mickey had shovelled out in the cutbank to permit him easy access to the trail with his pack-train.

He set the horses into the water, telling the Indian boy to go ahead and lead the way, while he followed.

Mickey urged his mount up beside the apron-blazed horse and they moved steadily forward. Some of the horses swam with little more than their heads above the water, and the side packs were hidden from view, while the bottoms of the top-packs were down below the water-line. But the apron-blazed Jack was carrying himself high in spite of the strong current, and the treaty money lay dry as a bone on the top of his back. Mickey chirruped with pride to him as they neared the other side and prepared to climb out on dry land ; but his chirrupings were cut short

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for the horses began to crowd and jostle as, driven by the rushing water, they fought for right-of-way to the narrow passage that promised security.

Mickey was hard put to it to keep his own mount steady and, in spite of the fact that he exerted every effort to make way for Jack, his horse nosed up ahead of him.

Discouraged, Jack yielded to the strength of the water, and was off down the creek before Mickey could jump to the ground and plunge, dressed as he was, after him.

Now the horse was nickering in fright, for the banks rose forbiddingly on either side of him, and as far as he could see they promised no foothold.

Mickey's breath was coming fast. The water was ice-cold and, although he was doing his utmost to gain on the horse, the distance between them did not seem to lessen.

He slowed a little to give himself breath with which to call assuringly to the frightened animal. It was a pretty feeble call when it came, but Jack heard and in a moment he was fighting the water and trying to get to his master. While he struggled, Mickey came up to him, and together they made their way downstream until a place could be found, that would afford them standing room where they could rest while they figured out a way to get to the top of the bank, for it was hopeless to think of returning against the swift current to the spot where the approach had been cut.

Soon they found a place where they could scramble up to a ledge a few feet above the water, and they accepted its hospitality. Mickey waited until some of his strength came seeping back before he made a megaphone of his hands and sent out a low, carrying whistle to his helper. Three times he called; then waited for a count of five before he sent out the call again.

The Indian boy came running to the top of the bank; then started the tedious descent, slipping and sliding along the steep cut-bank to the spot where Mickey stood.

"I thought Kee-chee-moguman was gone," he said,

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a little out of breath. "The horse, too; and all the treaty money."

Mickey's face was grey. "Well, at least we've got the treaty money," he said. "But how're we going to get this horse out of here?" he wondered.

"It would take a long time to dig your way out," the Indian boy said, thinking of the excavation entailed in digging the approaches to the Creek farther up, "the Indian Agent would not like to have to wait that long before he could pay treaty."

Mickey punched his left palm fiercely with his right fist. He was only too well aware of the unrest among the natives since the scarlet-coated Mounties had gone to fight in Europe and if the treaty money were withheld it might mean tremendous losses to the traders, for the Indians might turn sullen in their anger and refuse to trap. It would be useless to promise that next year the treaty money would be doubled, for an Indian does not push his thought into the next week or the next year, but concerns himself only with the "here and now." The treaty money had been promised. The Indians had come to accept and spend it. It must be paid.

"We can't let the horse stand here for long either," Mickey's forehead was creased with worry.

In a moment he was busy removing the packs from the thoroughly chilled horse. "We've got to get him covered with a blanket or something or he'll get pneumonia," he told the Indian boy, and leaving him to hold the horse's halter, he hoisted one of the packs on his back and started footing it up the high bank, fighting for a foothold, zig-zagging as he went, until he reached the top.

When he came back he had a blanket over his arm. While he put it over the shivering horse, he talked to him, encouraging him and trying to put some heart into him for the climb they must soon make.

"We'll get both these packs up to where the other

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horses are ; and I'll have to get into some dry clothes and bring the shovel here," he told the Indian boy. " Then we'll start taking Jack up."

" You try to take him, and you, maybe, fall in the river," the boy warned.

Mickey started to dig soon after that. He had no time to move the mountain of dirt that would have to be removed if they were to have a clear passage through ; but he had to make a path along which the horse could travel with some degree of safety. It was a winding, twisting path they took. Moving a few feet one way, then climbing up on a higher level and moving back in the direction from which they had come, before Mickey could shovel out a ledge on which they could rest before trying to advance any further.

Occasionally Mickey would take a chance on a narrow path and would urge the horse along it, only to have a hind leg slip over the ledge, when it would take all his strength to get them both on sure ground again.

It took hours of painful toil and anxiety before they reached the top of the cut-bank ; when Mickey's knees buckled under him and he lay on the ground, prone, while the Indian boy made tea and plied him with it.

" I don't know why I should flatten out like this all of a sudden," Mickey excused himself, when he could find speech.

" Men, all, do that," the boy said. " The Indian man, when he stalk the moose, he travel many miles over the snow. Sometimes it takes days before he gets a chance to shoot, for in the very cold weather a moose may hear a man walking a mile away. When the moose is shot, the hunter has to track all the way home again. Then he get his wife and family and he climbs on his horse and he rides to the spot where the kill was made. His wife and children they walk behind him carrying the teepee and everything they own so they can set up camp beside the fresh meat." The boy's face lit up with amusement. " The

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white man see that, and he says the Indian is lazy. He is not lazy; ; he is just tired."

Mickey nodded.

"Sometimes," the boy went on, "a hunter has a hard time getting up close enough to shoot." He handed Mickey another mug of steaming tea, "If the snow is crusty, he has to be very crafty if he is to get near the moose at all. Many times my father has gone out and he has had to cut pieces of the crust out with his knife and remove them to one side so that he would have room to put his feet down in the soft snow underneath, without being heard by the keen ears of the moose." There was a reflective pause, then, "Cutting your way step by step without being heard, after tramping several days, leaves you very tired."

Mickey's eyes closed then in spite of him; and when he woke up he found a blanket wrapped around him. Pushing it back, he asked the Indian boy how he had managed to get it under him without waking him.

"You were very tired," the boy said. "You not wake up no matter what happens." His voice bore no trace of the tenderness with which he had covered the weary figure who, like his own hunter-father, got very tired sometimes.

8

LONG before the summer of 1917 set in, Mickey went to Edmonton to plea for the privilege of carrying the mail by speeder along the track running north of Lac la Biche towards McMurray. "I can get it in there pretty fast that way," he said, "Much faster than taking it by boat and pack by way of House River; and with a team to meet me at the end of steel I can handle any small parcels of perishable goods that might be coming in," he said.

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The only way by which this mode of conveyance could be placed at his disposal was to give him the position of lineman on that territory, and he took over the task of looking after and keeping up the telephone line in addition to his many other chores.

* * * *

"Why the whole ten plagues of Egypt wasn't a circumstance compared with *this* !"

"It's our bounden duty to complain to the Government !"

"It ain't like me to hurl no brickbats at anyone ; but that Mickey Ryan, he's *getting out of hand* !"

"The Post Office gave him his start when they let him haul the mail in from Lac la Biche, even if it is nearest," one of the other men said. "But I call it an outrage when he gets hired as a lineman to look after the telephone line and the railway gives him permission to use a speeder along the track !"

"Everything he does is bound to hold up the coming of the railway," they mourned, "and we've been waiting for the coming of the railway for a long time."

"He's got to be put down," one man said, shaking his fist. "He's got to be put down *quick* !"

"Yeah," another agreed, "It's for the good of all of us he be downed !"

They assembled in formal meeting then, and when they had decided on the wording of the petitions to the railroad and the Post Office Departments, Mr. Potts got to his feet. "We are not selfish in sending these petitions," he said piously. "all we want is the betterment of McMurray !"

But in spite of his fine words, when Mickey heard about it, he said, "they're just bitter because I'm getting ahead," and he shrugged his shoulders.

When, soon after that, the Railroad reluctantly announced

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that due to labour conditions and Northern conditions, it would be impossible for them to attempt to run the train north to Lac la Biche during the summer months, Mickey went in to Edmonton with his speeder and made a petition of his own.

"An awful lot of people are wanting to get in and out of that country," he told the Railway Officials, "they need some kind of transportation." At their nod of agreement he went on, "no one knows how long the war in Europe may last," he ventured.

"We're in the fourth year of war now," they said resignedly, "we had hoped for victory before this."

"If I could put flange wheels on an automobile so it could be run on the railway track," Mickey told them, "I could take in what passengers and express there might be. Then the freight could be hauled in by train after freeze-up, for as soon as the road-bed gets solid with frost, the track is all right."

When Mickey returned to the North, he took with him a Hudson Six automobile, fitted with flange wheels, with a trailer, and announced that now he would be able to take in fruit, vegetables, eggs and candy, but the McMurray Board of Trade showed no gratitude for such delicacies. Instead they held another meeting, and fresh petitions were worded and sent out, while the town buzzed.

"The Alberta Government spends all that money buying a railroad, and then they turn all the traffic over to that Mickey Ryan who handles it with a one-horse velocipede."

"And we've got to pay double the railroad fare as far as Lac la Biche!"

"Yes, and he keeps *all the revenue!*" There was more than a touch of envy in the voice that spoke.

"What I don't like," the owner of the voice was playing with the heavy gold watch-chain looped across his dark blue vest. "What I don't like," he repeated, to give

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his next words emphasis, "is having to pay double fare, *and be tickled to death to do it*, to a man who a few years back was carrying my bag on the McMurray steamboat, and glad to do it!"

The letters of complaint kept growing in bitterness and pressure was brought upon the Government "to investigate a situation where a man is permitted to use a railroad built by the people of Alberta and being paid for out of taxes being collected from the good people of McMurray, and now it is turned over to this fellow Ryan who bought an automobile, hitched a trailer on behind it, and then takes on so many passengers that he has them standing on the running board on the coldest Fall days; even having the temerity to make the passengers get off and push when the going gets too bad for his engine. And on top of that charges them double the railroad fare to travel with him."

The matter of the railroad *must be investigated on the Floor of Parliament*, they insisted.

The telegraph operator at McMurray was the local correspondent for both Edmonton newspapers, and the story was sent in to them, and their voices were added to the cry for an investigation.

The Premier of the Province called Mickey in to Edmonton so that he could have a talk to him. "Look at these," he pointed to a stack of files on his desk. "These are letters and petitions against you from the McMurray Board of Trade!"

Mickey grinned good naturedly. "The winters are pretty long up there," he said in his soft voice. "We don't get much excitement, and there hasn't been much to divert their attention." His eyes twinkled. "The Missions and Police are doing such good work that we haven't had a murder in quite a while. And we don't have the epidemics we used to have. So I've taken the place of all of them."

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He and the Premier chuckled together ; but the other members of the Government were not so easily put off.

" They must have some grounds for complaint to write all this," they pointed to the packed files. Then " What are they like . . . these McMurray Board of Trade fellows ? " they wanted to know ; but all the answer they could get out of Mickey was " They're just a few old mossbacks that enjoy getting together to write petitions."

They continued to press for some further description of the leaders of McMurray ; but Mickey kept fumbling for words. Then, " I'll send you a picture of them," he promised at last, and with that they had to be content.

A week later every member of the Government received a postcard picture of the members of the Board of Trade taken as they posed outside the low log building that was their headquarters.

" You couldn't have done them more harm if you'd spent a week describing them," Pat commented, when Mickey told him what he had done.

" I guess the Government'll be able to see now what I mean by a bunch of mossbacks " Mickey said, grinning.

The Government seemed to lose interest in the matter around that time ; but the petitions and letters grew in venom with every passing week until at last Mickey turned on his persecutors.

" The only thing to do is to sue them for libel," his lawyer told him ; and soon most of the members of the Board of Trade of McMurray were boarding Mickey's " velocipede " and heading for Edmonton where the suit for libel was to be heard.

Mickey won, and when he had delivered his passengers back to Fort McMurray, they sent one of the men, who had stayed friendly with both sides, over to enquire from Mickey how much the trial had cost him.

Mickey scratched his head considerably, then, " well, with me winning the case, they had to pay the court costs ;

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and with the fare they had to pay me to ride out and back, why I more than made expenses." He stuck his hands in his pockets and his tongue in his cheek, "If business should get too bad any time, I may try to rig up another case," he said.

Now Mr. Potts came calling on Pat Ryan. "I've been made a fool out of," he roared in Pat's ear, "and the Board of Trade has just been made a tool of, by a fellow who was jealous of Mickey and wanted to down him." Then, "I've got a petition here in *favour* of him, and I want you to take it around and get it signed by everybody." He paused and blew his nose vigorously, "I can't sign it myself," he declared regretfully, "as I've signed too many petitions against him; but I'm writing personal letters to the Post Office Department and the Government Officials, explaining my position, and giving the picture as I see it."

Mickey was pleased when Pat told him the news. "I told you old Potts wouldn't hurt a fly intentionally," he said.

9

NOVEMBER of 1918 brought the end of the war in Europe, and now new hope flared throughout the North. There would be railroads, exploration parties, and prosperity.

Then 'flu struck with such force that its victims were too ill and weak to think of the future, and those who had not yet been attacked were so full of fear that their only thought was for avoiding the virulent germ.

The epidemic was at its height when a couple of policemen came to Mickey as he sat in the hotel in Lac la Biche, where he had come to pick up the mail. "They say

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Barbeiay is up at Big Bay. Could you drive us out there to make the arrest?"

Mickey was not anxious to make the trip out to Big Bay, and he said so. "It seems kind of foolish to go rushing around just to arrest an Indian," he said, "when we may all catch the 'flu; and we'd better be near to home if that happens."

"They say some people are immune," the policemen insisted from behind their masks. "We haven't caught it yet, so maybe we're immune."

"Barbeiay has been running around loose for thirty days now and hasn't murdered anybody else, so it looks like he's safe to leave until the epidemic is over," he told them. "And besides," he added, "there's an awful lot of sick people around here that need what attention we can give them."

"This man Barbeiay has murdered two men," one of the policemen said with dignity, "He dumped their bodies in the lake. A crime like that must be punished as quickly as possible."

So Mickey took them in his car to Big Bay; but they failed to make the arrest, and they returned that day to Lac la Biche where Mickey found himself stricken suddenly with pain that bent him double, and he stumbled into bed, where his only medicine was a few pills from the meagre medical supplies of the doctor who had been brought in by the Government to fight the epidemic, and a glass or two of brandy administered by the owner of the hotel.

By morning the two policemen were also in bed with 'flu, and they were quite content now to wait for Barbeiay to come in to the post and offer himself up, rather than go "shooting it out" in order to bring him in.

It was some days before Mickey could make his legs support his body, and several more before he was well enough to think of going home. While he was recuperating a new guest arrived at the hotel, towering well over six feet under his ten gallon hat. His name was Hank.

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"He looks as if he were to take a spit, he'd crack a brick with it," Mickey said with a slow smile.

"This 'flu they're talking about," Hank said scornfully tilting his big hat back on his head, "it's no 'flu. Just a bad cold, that's all it is." Then, "I hear the bed bugs is awful bad in this hotel?"

Mickey nodded. "They're not so bad if you don't light a light," he advised, "I usually push my bed into the middle of the floor so they can't crawl up the wall and on to the bed."

"Oh, say," someone scoffed from the other side of the room, "the bed bugs here is so smart they crawl up the wall then along the ceiling until they get above the bed; then they drop right on to it."

Mickey nodded in agreement. "That's right," he said, earnestly.

"Gees," Hank said, "Is that so?" Then with a shake of the head, "Fleas I don't mind, and lice I'm used to . . . but neither my wife nor me likes bed bugs." A pause, then, "Guess I'd better roll in now," he said reluctantly, and went upstairs.

Next morning he was slow to roll out. "How're you this morning?" Mickey enquired pleasantly.

"Tougher'n hell," Hank replied. "And I've got to get home to look after my sheep."

Mickey went on down to breakfast, and a little later Hank came and sat beside him, a trifle shaky.

"How're you now?" Mickey asked dutifully.

"My wife gave me near a quart of salts," he said with a shudder. "I don't know how that's going to turn out yet, but——" He threatened to become loquacious, but the entrance of the doctor, black bag in hand, cut him off.

The doctor looked Mickey over. "Soon be ready to leave us," he said cheerfully, then turned to Hank. "You'd better go to bed," he advised, delving into his bag, "Here, take these," He handed over a few aspirin tablets. "If

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you can get some lemonade," he went on, "drink it down hot. After a good sleep you'll be all right," he told him.

And now a meek looking little woman came over. "Come on, Hank," she coaxed, "Do as the doctor tells you."

"Meet my wife," Hank said to Mickey. Then, getting to his feet unsteadily, "Maybe I'd better do like she tells me." He let her lead him back to his room, bumping into the slightly drunk bush-lawyer who was descending the narrow staircase.

"This epidemic is kind of bad," Mickey mused aloud.

"Yeah," the lawyer took a swig from the bottle he was carrying. "The only way to kill the germs is with alcohol," he assured Mickey with an apologetic smile.

They sat, staring gloomily at each other, until the sheepowner's wife came tiptoeing down the stairs. "He's started sweating something terrible," she told them nervously, "and I can't make him keep the covers on."

"God damn it, they're leaving me here to die," Hank's voice boomed now, "I might as well be comfortable!" Then a pause before he added mournfully, "And if I die, who'll look after the sheep?"

* * * *

He died, and his wife wept uncontrollably on the shoulder of the bush lawyer. The lady who owned the hotel wept because she didn't want a corpse in her house, and some of the guests and help wept because there was an excuse for weeping.

Mickey went in and closed the staring eyes, folding the hands carefully across the breast. Then, knowing the Indians' belief that the germs from the dead body would now be looking around for another victim to enter, he suggested that the corpse be taken away as quickly as possible.

The widow began to rave wildly and protest that her husband must not be rushed to the grave before he got cold; so Mickey called in the local police.

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They came, wearing gauze masks, and Mickey enlisted their help in wheelbarrowing the body from the hotel-room to the shed at the back of the building. Each policeman had hold of a leg, while Mickey carried almost the full weight on his back, and as they were about to place their burden on a low bench beside the wall, it slipped, hitting the paved walk with a dull thud.

It was the signal for the newly-made widow to come running up to them, the lawyer hard at her heels.

"I watched you taking my poor dead husband from his room," she sobbed, "And he looked so limp, I'm sure he can't be dead!"

"If he wasn't dead before, he's sure dead after that bump," was all the answer she got, and the three men went about the matter of hammering a coffin out of the few boards that could be collected together.

The widow dried her eyes. "I won't have him buried without a Baptist Minister to read the service," she announced firmly now.

"There are no Baptist Ministers hereabouts," Mickey was busy with a saw. "It'd take weeks to get one here, maybe, with this epidemic on."

The widow renewed her sobbing. The lawyer patted her shoulder. Mickey picked up a hammer and held it as if about to use it while he said, "The best thing to do is to get the body laid away in the cemetery as soon as we can." His voice was purposeful.

"I'll read the service for you," the lawyer promised gallantly with a hiccup, and the widow smiled through her tears.

"Good!"

Mickey sent one of the policemen off to get a rig, Then, "Rustle up a prayerbook to read the burial service out of," he suggested, and the other policeman went to look for one.

During the eight mile trip to the cemetery the lawyer

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sobered greatly, and by the time the other three men had worked for a couple of hours with shovel and pick on the frozen ground and Mickey could straighten up and say "Well, I think we've got a place the coffin will fit into now," he was cold sober. The policeman pushed the prayer-book into his hands and he blanched. "I can't read a funeral service. I can't!" he moaned.

Mickey knew that it was useless to press the point. "Here," he said to the policemen, "One of you read it!"

But the policemen shook their heads. "We can't do it either."

The three men stood looking at Mickey with an adamant resolution that he knew he could not break through.

"Let's go back to Lac la Biche and get the school-teacher," the lawyer suggested.

"The teacher's laid up with 'flu," Mickey said, with a sigh.

"Why don't you read it?" one of the policemen suggested to Mickey, his breath coming white on the air as he spoke.

Mickey said nothing. For a long moment he reflected on the North and its odd ways.

He remembered vividly the time when he had as one of his passengers a Metis girl who had been ordered to Edmonton to have her appendix removed. Accompanied by her sister she boarded one of Mickey's wagons, but by the time they reached House River she was crying out with pain, yet burying her face in the pillow and refusing to answer when anyone asked her what was wrong.

At last she insisted on being left alone with Mickey and after much prompting, blurted out her trouble.

He came away from her bedside to enquire whether he could borrow either a bulb syringe or a hot water bottle with attachments for giving an enema.

"No such thing around here. None nearer than Athabasca Landing. If there," came the ready answer.

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But Mickey was loath to let a condition which had lasted a week, continue until they reached another camp, and half an hour later he was whittling on a broomhandle, boring through it with bit and brace and fitting into it a shank from a corn-cob pipe, while he prayed that when he had finished he would be able to make the contraption work.

"I need a new rubber wader," he said presently. "I don't like to use an old one if I can help it," explaining that it would have to substitute for a hot water bottle and serve as container for the soapy mixture he was stirring up.

The boot was brought. A hole was cut in the toe and the end of the whittled broom handle inserted in it. The soapy water had a teaspoonful of turpentine added to it and was poured into the make-shift container. A small amount of vaseline was rubbed on the stem of the corn-cob pipe to make entry easier. Then, expert as any nurse, Mickey set to work.

Within the hour the girl was sleeping quietly, the pain gone.

Yes, Mickey mused, the North was a little different from Indiana, or Edmonton, or Chicago. There, no one would be likely to thrust a prayerbook into your hands, suggesting that you read the burial service at a moment's notice.

"I couldn't do it," he told himself, "Not in this outfit," glancing down at his mackinaw jacket, shapeless pants and moccasined feet. The funeral rites called for black vestments, put on with a prayer.

"We can't very well put him in the grave without a word being said," the widow said meekly.

"Oh, what the hell difference does it make who reads the service," Mickey exploded, turning the pages impatiently until he came to "Order of the Burial of the Dead."

"Eternal rest give unto him, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon him." He tossed the words off with the same casualness with which he would have tossed a forkful

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of hay to a horse. "I have found tribulation and sorrow," he read and his words were coming more slowly now, freighted with meaning.

"I believe that my Redeemer liveth, and that in the last day I shall rise from the earth, and in my flesh I shall see God!"

He was no longer conscious of the presence of the four people gathered by the shallow grave, gaping at him as he read. It was as if he had stepped into a new realm with the acceptance of the duty of seeing that this man was given Christian burial. And now he knew that Faith in God, hope in God, love for God, were all that a man needed to make him fill any post his Creator required of him.

On the way back to the hotel Mickey was quiet. He had much to ponder. Much to think about.

Suddenly a voice ripped through his musing. A male voice that said urgently. "You *will* marry me, won't you?"

Mickey caught his breath in violent surprise. He waited for a storm of indignation from the bereaved woman. And in the long silence that piled itself up he felt cold fury at the audacity of a man who would break in upon a woman's fresh grief to propose marriage, even in this country where women were scarce and a man had to work fast.

The widow drew in her breath and Mickey knew that she was ready for speech. But the words did not come with the swift fury he expected. Instead, with a note of quiet regret in her voice, she said softly, "I'm terribly sorry; terribly sorry," a little pause and then, "but you see I already got asked before we went to the cemetery!"

* * * *

During the next few weeks Mickey was busy hauling mail and trying to get it delivered on schedule; while at the same time trying to stop over at cabins where the 'flu had struck and haul and stack wood by the stove,

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dole out a ration of whiskey or brandy, and leave a box of aspirins, before he took to the trail again.

At one shack where he stopped, the whole family was laid up, except one little girl of four who had carried in enough sticks to keep the fires going and attended to the chores for four days before Mickey's arrival. When he praised her in none too eloquent Cree, she climbed up on his knee and rested her tired little dark head against his until she fell asleep.

He laid her on a low couch in the corner, and covering her tenderly with a Hudson's Bay blanket, went out to the woodpile and started to bring in the wood they would need for the next week.

The father and mother watched him from their bed of spruce boughs ; but they said nothing. Only their eyes lit up with gratitude, and in a few moments they, too, were asleep.

As soon as he got back to McMurray he went out to Willow Lake Reserve for news had come in that the Indians there were in a bad way.

"We buried eight yesterday in one grave," one of the old men told him from the couch where he was lying, "Seven got cold and stiff," he said, "but the eighth was limp ; and," he marvelled, "just before they buried her she broke out in sweat all over." He paused for a moment ; then, when he had swallowed the aspirin Mickey gave him, "There's nine out there now waiting to be buried," he said fearfully, "Been there since morning ; but no one had the strength to dig a grave."

Mickey gave swift assurance that he would look after that, and knowing the Indian fear that the germs from the dead hurried to find fresh victims, he decided to attend to the necessary burials before ministering further to the sick.

"At least it's easy enough to get a grave dug around here," Mickey said as the sandy soil yielded easily to spade and shovel, and soon the blanket-wrapped bodies were

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laid in the rude grave, while Mickey felt hot resentment at this wholesale burial and his own inability to do anything to remedy it. But when he got back to McMurray and stopped to read the news on the bulletin board outside the telegraph office, he read "Steamshovels being used in New York to bury people dying with the 'flu."

At least the Indians had a friend to carry them to their last resting-place and to lay them gently on the earth that was so eager to take them to her. And the sand would lie lightly on them.

* * * *

"Now that the war in Europe is over we can expect work on the railroad to be resumed."

As soon as the 'flu epidemic had run its course, meetings were held to discuss the future of McMurray, and petitions were worded and sent out requesting that the railroad be brought to McMurray at all costs.

"I paid three thousand dollars for the lot I've got my place on," one man would say, "and I'd sure like to get my money out and get away from here. I don't ever want to be as sick as I was this winter and be this far from any where!"

"Me neither!" another man would echo, and go on to tell in detail just how the 'flu had struck him, giving a full list of his symptoms while he had wrestled with the germ, and then declare, "It left me weak as a cat! Don't suppose I'll ever get my full strength back!"

And the others would nod in full agreement.

10

MICKEY never knew exactly who started it, but soon it grew evident that there was a movement afoot to curb the activities of Mr. Bryan in the North. All

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free-traders were unpopular with the representatives of the old established Hudson's Bay Company, but Mr. Bryan no more so than any other. Then, suddenly, almost overnight, the McMurray Board of Trade was crying "He's ruining the Indians, paying cash for their furs!" And when Mickey rejoined that the Indians would have to learn how to handle money some time, they turned on him.

"The Indians have always been used to selling their furs to the traders, then taking what they wanted in trade. They've never been used to handling money. They're doing all kinds of foolish things with it—going out to the city for the train ride and squandering everything they have in there—when the truth is, they ought to be building up a reserve for the lean days ahead.

"Besides," one member of the Board of Trade added, "They don't bring their furs into McMurray the way they used to, no more. When they came in here with their dogs, it brought trade here. Now they don't come no more."

"And them Indians up to Chipewyan have no respect for Bryan," they declared, "He pays too much for what he buys," cocking an eye at Mickey, and waiting for some rejoinder; but none came.

"As far as we're concerned," one of the older men summed it up, "The only difference between Ryan and Bryan, is, that Bryan has an extra "B" in his name!"

"Maybe we'll never hear from him again!" and the conversation was turned into other channels.

Mickey was too busy to give much thought to Mr. Bryan during the days that followed, for he was kept busy hauling mail, passengers and freight into McMurray; but when a telegram arrived from Edmonton, reading: "Important you come Edmonton immediately. Must discuss business which cannot be covered by wire or mail. If coming, wire me care of the King Edward Hotel," and signed J. H. Bryan, Mickey sent word that he would come immediately; but when he got to the end of steel

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and was ready to climb aboard the train with his grub boxes, the engineer and fireman announced that the coal that had been delivered for their use was no better than mud, and it would be impossible to keep a fire going so they would have to go to Lac la Biche without any passengers.

"We'll have to go in with the engine and caboose and cut wood all the way there, to fire with," they complained.

"It's kind of urgent that I go out," Mickey said anxiously. Then, "You'll need someone to give you a hand sawing wood," he told them. "And I'd be glad to help," pointing out that there were only three of them, and four would make a more efficient gang as it took two men at a time to work the crosscut saw that would have to be kept busy sawing wood to keep the engine going.

Fred Martin, the train conductor, gave a hearty O.K. to his offer, and the four men set out.

"We may be as long as three weeks on the way," the engineer warned as Mickey threw his grub boxes aboard; but Mickey laughed that off. "It's only when you have a heavy load that you start jumping the tracks," he said, and prayed he might be right.

"These grates were made for coal," the fireman said, "We'll have to keep the blower going all the time."

Mickey teamed up with the engineer on the saw. When they could find railway ties they sawed them in two and fed them to the greedy engine; but most of the time they had to be content with sawing down the fire-killed spruces that stood like skeletons along the way, and burning them.

"Practically all the wood goes out through the smoke-stack," Mickey said wearily at the end of the first night; but he kept on the crosscut saw until, at the end of three days, they arrived at Lac la Biche and he tumbled into bed, dog-tired, to get himself rested up before continuing the trip to Edmonton.

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"Well, Mickey, at last I've put the deal through! I got plenty of backing from New York," were the first words that came from Mr. Bryan when Mickey walked into his room at the King Edward Hotel. "And now," there was an affectionate pause, "I want your help!"

Mickey grinned his pleasure, "I'm ready to back you a hundred per cent," he promised. "I can't do any more than that."

"This company I'm lined up with," Mr. Bryan's voice was earnest, "the Lamson-Hibbard Company—they're going into the North *strong*!" There followed details of the amount of freight there would be to haul and the method of hauling. "The worst part of the whole business," Mr. Bryan declared, "is that sixteen mile haul between Fort Fitzgerald and Fort Smith."

A gleam came in Mickey's eyes at mention of his trail.

"That haul has kept a lot of outside traders out of the North," Mr. Bryan said, quietly, "But I'm counting on you to get our freight across, come wind, come rain, come bullfies or mosquitoes . . . not to mention the hundred and one other hazards you may expect to meet with." He paused and lit a cigar, "I wouldn't have gone into this thing, if I hadn't felt you could carry the hauling part through."

Mickey's heart leapt up for a moment, and he pictured himself with horses and men and barges hauling in merchandise that would be exchanged for beautiful pelts that would find their way into all parts of the world. Over his highway they would go.

Then he caught himself up short. There was no highway. He had less than a dozen horses, one hired man, his brother Pat, and no barges.

"Mr. Bryan," he said hesitantly, "You know the size of my outfit." He could not make himself put into words its meagreness. "You know I couldn't handle anything

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like the amount of freight the Lamson-Hibbard Company are thinking of shipping in."

"The freight is yours to haul." Mr. Bryan puffed at his cigar a moment, enjoying its bouquet, then "Go get yourself an outfit!" he said, with a wave of his hand.

Mickey got to his feet and moving to the damask-hung window, stood looking down at the traffic in the narrow street below. "It's a pretty big order," he said. His words dropped slowly. He could not tell this man that almost every cent he owned was tied up in the small outfit he had, and that no one would lend him enough money to buy the quantity of equipment he would need to handle the freight for this company, especially as it was a new venture.

Well, Mickey knew how a newcomer could be treated in the North; and when it was a company entering into competition with the old, established Hudson's Bay Company, it was crossing swords with a worthy opponent.

"What are you hesitating for, Mickey?" Mr. Bryan asked, flicking the ashes from his cigar into the heavy glass ashtray near his elbow.

"It's like this," Mickey blurted out, "I figure it'd cost thirty thousand dollars to get that equipment together." He jerked at his tie nervously, "Thirty thousand dollars is thirty thousand dollars in anybody's money; and I haven't got that much!"

He paused, and Mr. Bryan let the silence grow up between them.

"No one'd give me credit to build up an outfit for your company," he went on when he saw that Mr. Bryan was not going to say anything. "The Hudson's Bay Company have stopped giving credit to the Indians, as you know. The first time they've ever done it in all the years they've been in the North. Everyone is banking on the fact that they know what they're doing and that the bottom will fall out of the price of furs." He fingered his tie nervously.

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"They'll figure you'll have, may be, one season to last . . . if that long."

"I know how they'll figure," Mr. Bryan took his cigar from his mouth and gazed meditatively at its grey ash for a long minute. Then, "This work has to be done," he said decisively. "I don't know anyone else in the world except you that could do it." He got to his feet, and looking down from his good height, said, "You figure out how much you'll need, and we'll go over to the bank together and I can arrange for them to honour whatever cheques you draw."

Mickey started to extend his hand, but drew it back quickly. "That thirty thousand dollars is just for the equipment," he said hesitantly, "There'll be feed and the men's wages on top of that."

Mr. Bryan nodded. "Any legitimate expense you can draw ahead for," he told him, and Mickey let out a sigh of relief. "Now I guess I can start to breathe easy again. There for a few minutes, I felt kind of choked up."

"And now, Mickey, it's a deal!" Mr. Bryan held out his hand and Mickey shook it heartily. "How about a drink to celebrate?" and as Mickey declined, "I forgot you don't drink, Mickey!" Then, as he poured one for himself,

"Here's to us—you and I!
May we eat when we're hungry,
Drink when we're dry!
Buy at the low point,
And sell at the high!"

He sipped at the drink, then came over and put his arm around Mickey's shoulder. "There's lots of money to be made in the North," he said, now. "Only you have to be able to get the stuff in and out." He laughed happily, "And I'm the fellow that's got it figured out how to transport my stuff!"

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He tossed off his drink, and turned to pour himself another. "Too bad you don't drink, Mickey," he said, then returned to his subject. "For hundreds of years they've been held up with rapids and muskeg; and now I'm the fellow that's found the man that can get around the rapids, and the muskeg, and the rivers, and the creeks!" he exulted. "Mickey, I'm going to make a fortune in the North, and you're going to make one with me!"

When the people of McMurray heard that the new company was coming in to bring supplies which they would trade for furs, they laughed. But when Mickey started hiring men and buying up equipment, they stopped laughing. They stopped laughing, but they did not swing over to his side completely. The farthest they would go now in speaking of him was to say, with a doubtful shake of the head, "It's hard to tell whether he's an ass or an asset!"

11

"THE McMurray Board of Trade isn't much *for* him," Pat said one day with an eye on the sky. "The weather doesn't seem to be going to favour him much, either."

Mickey nodded unhappily in agreement.

"We'll never be able to get all this stuff hauled into McMurray now before the snow goes," Pat went on, as if reading his brother's mind.

"I've thought of all that. Been thinking of it for days; but I have no solution in sight." Mickey told him. "I sometimes wonder why I've been so unlucky," he mourned, "It seems everything I turn my hand to goes wrong."

"I often think of Grandmother Ryan," Pat's deep voice celloed through the big barn, "Such a little bit of

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a woman she was, and knowing so much sorrow. Her favourite son lost in the Civil War, and four others brought to sudden and tragic ends. Such a deal of sorrow she'd known," he said, hammering idly at the anvil, "Yet to the day of her death she'd say as chirrupy as you please. "Never curse at the darkness, for that way ye waste yer breath. Instead light a little candle for yerself."

Mickey's brows drew together. "It's easy enough to light a candle, if you have one," he said crossly ; but Pat did not hear him.

"Do you mind the way she'd bring her purse out of the pocket of her skirt and open it up to give us a nickel for birthdays and Christmases, and her with only a small pension to make do on ? "

Mickey nodded.

"The Ryans were a great family, and great ones to stick by one another, especially in bad times," Pat went on.

Mickey chuckled. "What are they needing now ? " he asked in Pat's ear.

Pat blushed. "Only the usual," he said, a little embarrassed. "With so many children to bring up, it's kind of hard for them," he said sympathetically.

"With the fifty dollars we send them every month, they ought to be better off than they ever were," Mickey bristled.

"They should be," Pat admitted, "But things cost more than they used to," he defended them, "And the younger children are not content with as little as we used to get."

"And why should they be ? " Mickey asked himself, remembering the Christmas morning when he had crept down the narrow stairs in Indiana, and pushed open the door into the kitchen, prepared to pounce with joy upon the gifts piled high for him, only to have the eagerness spill out of him, leaving him bleak and empty and somehow afraid, as he saw his father sitting on the low chair near the stove, his head buried in his hands, while great sobs shook his huge shoulders. Dolly Ryan stood away

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from him a little, her hands crushing her checked apron into a tight knot, while her face worked convulsively, in spite of her effort to control it.

While Mickey watched, his father pushed his grief aside, and blowing his nose noisily into his handkerchief, rose and put his arms around his wife. "It's a black day it is, in spite of it 'being Christmas," he said heavily. He kissed her, "But," he went on, "There's one thing we've still got . . . our love."

Mickey shut the door quietly and started back up the stairs.

He crawled into his crumpled bed. It was cold and uncomfortable. He buried his face in his pillow and fought against tears. Fought a successful battle, for now the other children were stirring. "I wonder what Santa brought," the voices were high with excitement.

"Maybe," Mickey's voice faltered, "Maybe we haven't all been as good as we ought to have been," he prepared them. "Maybe he won't have brought us anything." He was pulling on his clothes, wondering what he should say now.

"Oh, silly!" That was Blanche. "Santa brings everyone presents!"

"No, he doesn't!" Mickey protested. And there was born within him a fierce resolve never to be at the mercy of Santa Claus again. From now on he'd make the money to buy his own presents and those for the rest of them. He stuttered a little now. It would never do to let the children go downstairs to find thin porridge awaiting them, without any sign of its being Christmas, and only their father and mother to explain to them that Christmas was not coming to them. He felt a little superior to his parents now. They were so young; crying, then talking of love.

"Look, kids! There isn't any Christmas this year," he said earnestly. "You know how it's been—Dad getting his arm bloodpoisoned—another baby." He paused and

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his chin set stubbornly "But next year," he declared, "We'll have the dingbustedest Christmas you ever saw. Lots of everything!" he promised.

He was quiet for a while, remembering. Then he put his arm around Pat, pulling him to him affectionately, "If everything goes well with this Lamson-Hibbard freight, we'll send home some extra money to help out," he said.

Pat grinned. "Ruth says they've been talking around Muncie about how well we've been doing. So I guess, maybe it wouldn't do any harm to live up to the brag."

Mickey turned away so that Pat could not see his face. For there was fear written on it; and he could not bear to have his brother know how anxious he was. Thirty thousand full dollars in debt, horses and men to be fed, wages pledged, and the weather breaking before they were ready for it.

Suddenly his face lit up; his eyes sparkled at the zenith of their blueness, his shoulders straightened, and he reached for his coat. "I'm going to send a telegram," he called to Pat, and left the barn, his moccasined feet carrying him swiftly to the telegraph office where he sent a message to Mr. Bryan:

Freight so late arriving end of steel, will be unable to get it all to McMurray before snow gone. Recommend, instead of hauling it to McMurray, it be taken three miles to the mouth of Christina River where it joins the Clearwater River. Warehouse there abandoned by J. D. McArthur Company when railroad built. Arrange for its use.

When the message had been sent he went back to the barn, whistling a tune as he pushed the door open. "Well, we're all set," he told Pat, and went on to outline the scheme for storing the freight in the old warehouse instead of bringing it in to McMurray.

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"The people here won't like it," Pat warned. "They'll say you're trying to ruin the country or something."

"Oh, nonsense!" Mickey poohed as he reached for a bucket in which to fetch oats for the horses, "You're just looking for trouble!"

But later, when Bob Arnett came into the barn and started harnessing his team without feeding them, saying that he was in a big hurry as he was taking Mr. O'Coffey to the end of steel on very important business, Mickey began to wonder.

"What would the manager of the N.T. Company be doing at the end of steel on important business this time of the day?" he asked himself over and over.

Suddenly an angry glint appeared in his eye and he started to throw the harness on his own team.

"I'm going up to the end of steel to take possession of that warehouse," he yelled at Pat, "Throw a few tarps and hay and stuff on the sleigh in a hurry." Then to himself, "If that telegraph operator has told him about my telegram, I'll——" He ground his teeth on what he had in mind, and hitched up the team while Pat threw a few bales of hay and a couple of tarpaulins on top of the sleigh; then pulled out, warning Pat not to say anything to anyone about anything. "Bob'll be busy right now picking up his passenger, and I'll be out there ahead of them," he clicked to the horses and was on his way.

The warehouse was no more than a temporary shack, unpainted, poorly constructed, and without a stove or comfort of any kind; but Mickey knew that before the evening was out it would have become a warehouse, built of whipsawn logs, well chinked and weather-sound, situated at the junction of two important rivers, and worth a small fortune.

The door squeaked on its rusty hinges, and Mickey propped it open with a slab of wood. Then took formal possession of the building by dumping a couple of bundles

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of hay in one corner, and spreading the tarpaulins out in the middle.

This done, he sauntered out and stood beside his team waiting for Bob Arnett to drive up with his passenger. Already sleigh bells jingled on the evening air, and a satisfied smile played at the corners of Mickey's mouth as he watched them coming.

"Hello," he waved his hand to the two men. Bob Arnett gave back a sheepish "Hi!", but Mr. O'Coffey was in no mood for greetings. He gave curt instructions to his driver to turn back and they headed for McMurray, O'Coffey muttering and cursing most of the way there.

The next day he sent a note to Mickey informing him that he had noticed that freight had been stacked in the N.T. Warehouse at the mouth of the Christina River, and requesting that such freight be removed immediately.

Mickey ignored the letter.

A few days later another letter arrived from Mr. O'Coffey demanding an answer to his previous communication and the immediate removal of the freight from the warehouse.

Mickey did not answer.

A third letter came, and following it came Tom Conn, one of the N.T. men, saying "O'Coffey's in quite a state. He can't stand to have his letters ignored. I think he's madder about that than about the warehouse."

Mickey grinned. "I thought he would be," he said.

"He sent me over to see you and ask you to hand over the warehouse and acknowledge receipt of his letters," Tom Conn's eyes pleaded with Mickey, "Do me a favour Mickey, answer his letters, will you?"

Mickey nodded. "Sure I'll answer them, as a favour to you!" A light of devilry was dancing in the blue eyes now, and Tom felt urged to warn "Be careful what you say in your letter. There'll be a lawsuit over this, and don't say anything you wouldn't want read in court."

"I won't," Mickey promised, and went over to the

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Railway Agent to ask him to type a letter for him. "Address it to Mr. F. L. O'Coffey, General Manager of the N.T. Company," Mickey instructed.

"He's not the *General Manager*," the Railway Agent interposed mildly. "He's just——"

"I know what he is," Mickey said firmly, "but he likes to think that he's the general manager; so we'll let him have the title this time."

The Railway Agent began to type, and soon Mickey was going through the formalities. "Your letters received," and the typewriter clicked evenly as his voice called off the details. Then it came to a sudden stop as Mickey continued with "And I would appreciate it if, in future, you would type your communications to me on toilet paper, as in that way I will be able to find good use for your letters."

"Go on, type it," Mickey urged, and the Railway agent tapped it out, then handed the sheet over for signature. Mickey signed it and had it delivered.

Then he went back to his work, hauling freight from the end of steel with his teams, fretting over the inexperience of the teamsters he had working for him, and trying to get some system into the loading and unloading. Coaxing a teamster here, showing another how to get the most out of his team, trying to teach them how to get their work done easily and efficiently.

"I guess it's you I want to see!"

At the words Mickey looked up, wiped a sleeve across his forehead, and saw a member of the Provincial Police Force standing beside him.

"What is it you want?" Mickey wanted to know.

"I have to lay a charge against whoever took over that warehouse at the mouth of the Christina River," the Policeman said crisply. "It's Government property. It's been damaged, I understand. So I have to arrest somebody over it."

"I guess I'm the lucky bird," Mickey said evenly.

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"You'll have to come to McMurray with me," the Policeman told him.

"I'll come as soon as I get the teams unloaded," Mickey's voice was over-pleasant.

"Teams?" the policeman gasped in dismay. "Why unload the teams?"

"I'll have to take the teams in with me," Mickey said firmly.

"But what about all the freight?" the policeman spluttered, eyeing the heavy bales of supplies. "A lot of this stuff is valuable merchandise. It can't stand out unprotected."

"I guess I'll have to let someone else worry about that," Mickey declared. "I have nobody here that I would feel like leaving my horses with." He kept his face grave. "You know how it is," he continued, tongue in cheek, "with all the bootleggers that's running around here, homebrew artists and everything. Half of these fellows," he nodded towards the teamsters, "would be drunk before night if there's no one to keep an eye on them."

The policeman reddened, for in this country, with liquor a commodity to be used as a medicine and then only by the privileged whites, any hint of free-flowing liquor or drunkenness was a reflection on himself. "Stay until you have all the freight hauled," he told Mickey helplessly, "Then come in to McMurray."

Mickey got the freight loaded and on its way; then went in to McMurray where the papers were served on him ordering him to appear before the local court. Almost at the same moment a telegram was handed to him from Mr. Bryan saying that he was leaving Lac la Biche that day. So Mickey requested that the case be adjourned until Mr. Bryan arrived, as if there were any grounds for a lawsuit it should be brought, not against him, but against Mr. Bryan and his company.

Flat refusal met his request, and the trial started.

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Pat tried to remind him that "Seeing he's on the train and coming, he'll be here in time to have the case thrown out of court."

But Mickey knew the train too well. "It's off the track half the time," he told Pat, "and when it isn't off the track it stops for some other fool reason!" His eyes greyed. "You know the tracks are no more than a cobweb, and one ounce too much weight and they sink into the muskeg."

"But this time," Pat said, "This time it'll get through!" Then under his breath he added prayerfully, "I hope."

At the end of the first day of the trial Pat was voluble in his protests to Mickey. "What do they want to have two J.P.'s on the case for? Anyone would think they were going to hang you!" he cried indignantly. Then, "Wait till Mr. Bryan gets here, they'll all look like fools," he promised.

But at the close of the second day he was less confident. "I don't like it, Mick; I don't like it," he said with a worried frown, "The telegraph operator sitting there as court stenographer. It doesn't look right to me!"

"A fine seventeenth of March," Pat grumbled, "Spent in court, with your life at stake, and no one to defend you," he paused, "and the whole town sitting in that courtroom gloating over your misery."

"I'm not miserable," Mickey protested. "When Mr. Bryan gets here, everything will be fine. My main concern is whether I can spin the trial out until he arrives!"

"I have a fellow waiting with a horse at the end of steel for him so that when he gets there all he'll have to do is rush right over here," Pat told him.

Mickey nodded his approval of that. "Well, we'll see what to-morrow brings forth."

It was late afternoon of the next day before the court adjourned so that the two Justices of the Peace could weigh the case before giving their judgment. The court was

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cleared, and everybody, including Mickey and the Policeman, moved out into the street. A few moments later, however, the door opened and one of the J.P.'s beckoned to the policeman to return.

Mickey turned to go, too ; but they stopped him.

"If you're going to discuss the case, I'd like to be present," Mickey said politely ; but the J.P. was firm.

Mickey stood there looking at the door that had been closed against him ; and there rose within him a strong urge to break it down, to hammer his way in and demand justice ; but Pat was at his elbow. "You haven't done anything wrong so far," he said in his deep voice, "But if you go and batter the door down they'll put you in jail, sure. Maybe send you out to Fort Saskatchewan." He paused. "It'd make mother feel terrible if you were to go to jail," he told him.

Mickey let his hands drop to his sides, with a chuckle. His mother had been a Ross "before she threw herself away on that young blacksmith, John Ryan." She would no doubt faint at the thought of Mickey being in court, not to mention serving a jail term.

The door opened and the policeman announced that the court was about to reassemble.

Mickey took his place, the people poured into the building, and those who could find seats took them, while the others lounged against the walls waiting for the verdict.

It came quickly, and Mickey was found guilty of damaging Government property *without any colour of right* ! The amount of the fine was fixed at ten dollars, and the costs amounted to \$4.20 ; which Mickey was called upon to pay immediately.

He pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket, and peeling a fifty dollar bill off the outside threw it down, telling them that he was paying both fine and costs under protest as he was sure that when Mr. Bryan arrived the decision of the court would have to be changed.

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The policeman immediately declared in a solemn voice that the court was closed, adding with great dignity, "God save the King!"

"Now," Mickey said informally to the Bench, "I'd like you to explain one thing to me." His voice was silken-smooth. "Why is it, as soon as the court adjourns to consider a case and weigh the facts before the decision is given, the judge always calls in the policeman before he knows what to say?"

The J.P.'s spluttered and reached for their gavels, while the policeman moved angrily to Mickey's side.

"It looks kind of bad to the people on the street," Mickey went on.

One of the J.P.'s cut in with, "You will now be fined a further ten dollars for contempt of court." He used his gavel to give emphasis to his speech.

Mickey turned to the policeman. "I wish you'd explain to him," nodding to the Bench, "that the court is closed. That there is no court. And that I can't be fined for contempt."

There was an angry snort from the Bench, the policeman echoing it, while Mickey said coolly, "Now give me my change and I'll be off."

"We have no change." The words came with all the dignity that could be mustered under the circumstances. Then, "Have you not got anything smaller?" with an enquiring look at Mickey.

"I need what change I've got," Mickey declared, and they handed the fifty dollar bill back to him, suggesting that he could pay the fine another time. He took it, set it back in his billfold, and left the court-room for the hotel.

"Look," Pat nudged him as they were ready to turn in at the hotel door, "Here comes Mr. Bryan."

Mickey looked up, and his face brightened as he saw the well-built, powerful man astride the big-boned chestnut horse he had ridden in from the end of steel.

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"Well, I see you've had a thaw," he called to Mickey, ignoring the trial altogether in his greetings.

"Yeah," Mickey said, "It's turned quite warm and slushy," Then, "Here, I'll take your horse down to the barn," he offered, "You go on into the hotel and get something to eat."

Mr. Bryan turned the horse over to him without a word, but the hand he laid on Mickey's shoulder as he turned to go, had sympathy in it and understanding.

Mickey stayed at the barn doing one chore after another, while Pat urged him to go up to the hotel and have supper.

"No," Mickey told him, "I'm going to give them knockers every chance to say all they want to say to Mr. Bryan before I go in there."

"Now, Mick, you're just imagining things. No one is going to say anything," Pat soothed.

12

WHEN Mickey went up to the hotel Mr. Bryan was at one of the tables finishing his supper. Mickey moved to a seat well away from him, and started to eat.

Mr. Bryan drank the last of his coffee, lit a cigar, then came over and seated himself across from him. "Mickey," he said, "I want you to answer me one question."

Mickey laid down his knife and fork, the better to give his attention to the man before him.

"What do you think of the telegraph operator?"

Mickey told him.

"That's what I think, too," Mr. Bryan agreed. Then, "I've always thought a lot of him, too," he grieved. His voice became crisp and businesslike now, "Here's a message I wired you." He read off: "I own the warehouse at

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the mouth of the Christina River. If the N.T. Company has any freight or men in the warehouse, throw them out, and I will back you up for all of it. Have the trial remanded until I arrive if possible. If they don't remand it and the case goes against you, appeal it and I will stand all expenses."

"I never got the message," Mickey said dully.

"No," Mr. Bryan's voice was cold and steely, "And here's the message I got back from the telegraph operator : ' Do not think it advisable to deliver your telegram to Mickey for your own interests. You don't know, but if Mickey should get that wire when you back him up the way you do, he would be liable to turn loose and cause some bodily damage to some of his enemies ; and they would hold you responsible ! ' "

Mickey sat in speechless rage for what seemed like an eternity to the man across from him. Mr. Bryan had been prepared for an explosion of hot, searing words. Now he was frightened by the huge bulk of the silence that surrounded them. He was terrified to speak in case the anger should vent itself on him, and he was terrified not to speak ; for the spell of the silence must be broken.

He thought of things like " Now don't get your dander up," and " It's not worth getting mad about," but they were expressions totally inadequate for the dispersion of the violent wrath that was seething within this silent man now.

" The river's flooding awful bad," someone called, and the two men joined the rush for the riverbank to watch the onslaught of water that was flooding the section where the Northern Trading Company had their warehouse.

" It's already carried their boats back into the woods," someone said, and Mickey looked. A short laugh escaped him before he could check it ; then he stuck his fists in his pockets and watched silently with the rest.

" Hangingstone Creek Bridge is out ! " Word came late in the night, and a wail went up from the crowd. " How're we going to get out to the end of steel with the bridge gone ? " they moaned.

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Still the water rose and no one could do anything to stop it.

"The N.T. warehouse is wrecked and all the freight in it!" The telegraph operator sent the word out to Edmonton.

To Mickey the wrecking of the warehouse had seemed like something he had conjured up in a bad dream. Watching the ugly water as it carried on its destructive work, he felt as if it were the lava of his own hate that was pouring itself out; but he got no satisfaction from it, no release. Instead his hatred and bitterness became more intense, for now he was full of resentment at his lack of pity for O'Coffey in his loss; and full of fury at the man himself for having cheated him out of any tender feeling.

Mr. Bryan's face was haggard now. "I can't help worrying about my freight, up there at the Christina River," he said at last.

"It's hard to tell whether it's safe or not," Mickey told him. "No knowing whether the jam will affect that part of the country."

There was a long silence. Then, "I suppose with the water backed up and the rivers swollen," Mr. Bryan ventured, "I suppose it'd be pretty hard to get out there now."

"It would," Mickey let the two words drop heavily in front of Mr. Bryan.

"Would it be possible for you to go out there and take a look at the freight and see what could be done?" Mr. Bryan asked after another pause.

Mickey gave a low laugh. "Now you know, Mr. Bryan, every time you and I get together something happens. All of it trouble."

"I wouldn't put you to the trouble of taking me," Mr. Bryan said earnestly, "I'd only make it harder for you and delay you; and if I did go, I'd only do what you advised me to do; and whatever you do is all right with me."

Mickey took his hands from his pocket, punched his left palm with his right fist a couple of times, then said

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fiercely, "If I stay here, the way I feel I may kill somebody before morning. I might just as well be off by myself somewhere ; so I'll go."

Mr. Bryan breathed a sigh of relief. "I keep hoping my freight is all right," he let the words run out. "If it had been brought up here like we originally planned, it'd be all gone now." He made a gesture that took in the warehouses that had toppled into the water, as their foundations gone, they gave themselves to the flood. "Seeing it got saved this, I keep hoping it wasn't just to lose it at Christina."

"I'd better take a canoe and a long rope with me," Mickey said, as he saddled the roan horse he intended to use for his journey. "With so many rivers, and this cold weather, I don't want to be wading through any more water than I have to," he declared.

The first difficult crossing was at Hangingstone Creek. With the bridge out, there was no hope of crossing except to paddle across in the canoe. Tying a long rope to the horse's bridle, he gave him a gentle pat. Then, tossing the coil of rope into the canoe, he shoved it into the muddy water of the creek and started for the other side.

It was slow work getting across, for the water was rushing in mad run-away to join the big river below it. More than once it threatened to take the little craft with it, but Mickey got it steadied with an effort. Zig-zagging crazily, he inched his way to the other side, and when he got there he stepped out, taking the rope with him, but he could not save the canoe for the rushing waters had it at their mercy and were carrying it with them to the Great Far North.

Mickey looked around for solid footing, and when he had found it, began to pull on the rope until he could feel it draw on the bridle at the other side. At first the horse reared and fought against entering the rushing torrent ; but as Mickey continued to pull and call to him, he took the plunge.

But half way over, he was seized by terror again, and

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Mickey was hard put to it to keep his hold on the rope. Almost he was forced to relinquish it as his right hand threatened to give up ; but he gave all the weight to his left, knowing that one hand could not hold out for long against the force of the waters.

The horse neighed banshee-like in his fright, and Mickey kept calling to him, pleading with him to come to him, until the panic left him ; when, steadying himself, he followed the rope and his master's voice, nickering assuringly as he came nearer to the bank and climbed up on the little rise where Mickey patted and praised him for his work.

On they went, through the slush, until within eight miles of the end of steel, they came to another creek. The water was coming down on top of the ice, which had frozen to the bottom, and as Mickey watched it hurrying down to the big rivers below, he tried to estimate how deep it might be.

"Pretty deep," he figured, and stooped to take off his boots, which he threw around the saddle horn. Then, stuffing his socks in his pocket, he removed his coat, laid it across the saddle in front of him, and digging his heels into the horse's sides, urged him into the water.

Mickey shuddered as the icy coldness hit his bare feet, but he urged his mount on. He obeyed, but unwillingly ; and Mickey felt a sudden surge of pity for him, fording creeks, floundering through snow and slush, because a voice commanded him to . . . not knowing why such hardship was demanded of him. Mickey chirped to him, "Already half way across," he encouraged with a pat on the roan neck. But, as he spoke, the horse was swept off his feet ; and struggle as he would against it the torrent carried him with it downstream.

Mickey never knew how he managed to hang on to the reins throughout the struggle ; but hang on he did, until they reached a spot where a low willow spread its branches well over the river bank. He grabbed for one ;

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caught it, and refused to let it go, even though the reins were cutting into his other hand unmercifully and threatening to pull his arm out of its socket ; while all the time the horse sought frantically to find his feet.

It seemed as if the horse knew his master could not stand the strain much longer, for before long he gave a little nicker of satisfaction as he hit his stride ; and Mickey released his grip on the willow branch with a gasp of relief, then leaned over to pat the roan neck gratefully.

In a moment or two they were both on the river-bank, shivering a little and frightened, but thankful for the firm earth on which they stood.

His hat, shoes, coat and socks had been carried away in the crossing, so that now, wringing wet and weary though he was, Mickey was forced to keep warm by running ahead of the horse through the slush and snow. As soon as he felt comfortably warm, he would jump up and ride as fast as he could until the cold overtook him again, then he would get off and lead the horse for another couple of miles.

Eight miles of this, and neither teepee nor tent to offer him shelter. Then smoke in his nostrils told him he need not go on to Christina River, but could look around for refuge here.

Climbing into the saddle, he looked around. A blue cloud of smoke hung above a grey tent, and Mickey headed for it.

Two men, sitting at a table, were silhouetted clearly against the sides of the tent, and when Mickey jumped off his horse and opened up the flap of their shelter, they started to their feet in angry surprise.

For a second Mickey was disconcerted by their lack of friendly greeting ; but as they continued to regard him with something of dismay, he suddenly became conscious of the fact that he did not look like the kind of caller one might be anxious to receive in the wilds late at night.

"I guess I cut quite a figure," he said with a grin, looking down at his bare feet and wet clothing.

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They nodded, and he hurried on to tell them who he was, what had happened, and where he was going.

"I didn't know whether you were nuts or what!" one of the men laughed, motioning to him invitingly to draw up to the small camp stove.

"I couldn't figure whether you had dropped out of heaven or come from hell," the other man said, "But I was sure you'd come from Somewhere," he pulled up a dunnage bag as he spoke, and started to open it.

"After I get dried out and warmed up a bit, I can go down to the mouth of the Christina River," Mickey told them, "Then if the warehouse isn't gone like the ones at McMurray, I'll be able to rummage around and find some boots and stuff to put on."

"We've got some here." The contents of the dunnage bag were dumped on one of the cots now, and were being sorted over considerably. "Here, put these on," the voice came at last, pushing an armful of clothes at Mickey. Then, turning to his friend who was slicing bacon to go with the beans he had opened up, "I'll slice that for you, while you find him something for his feet. You're more his size."

"I'd better be on my way," Mickey said, as soon as he had eaten; and before long he was pulling up in front of the warehouse.

"We've been hoping you'd come," a couple of men came running up to him, "Now you'll be able to tell us what to do." Then, almost in the same breath, "How're things in McMurray?"

"The N.T. Trading Company's warehouse is washed out. All the freight in it, gone."

One of the men shook his head sadly. "That'll mean bad times in the North again. And if the food situation gets too bad, may be scurvy!"

Mickey nodded. Then, "I figured the jam in McMurray would make the water back up and rise here," he said. "No figuring how much it'll rise either."

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"It's still two inches from the floor," one of the men encouraged. "If the water goes down now, it'll be all right."

"You can't count on it going down though," the other man argued. "It'll most likely go up," he said pessimistically. "I've always found in the North, things never get better, they allus get worse."

Mickey said nothing.

"The only thing to do is to take the stuff out of there and move it on to higher ground." The speaker looked to Mickey for approval, but, instead, he shook his head. "We'd have to move it all of two miles before we'd get to higher ground, and there are no teams around to move it with."

Mickey walked into the warehouse and stood inspecting the stock for some time, his eyes dark and considering, and his lips pressed in a tight line. Suddenly he straightened and crisp orders were shot at the men beside him.

Mickey worked with them. First the barrels of gasoline and coal oil were rolled over to one end of the warehouse and set down to form a platform for the stores that were perishable. Then sacks of flour, sugar and meal were stowed above the barrels; the cartons, cases, and boxes were perched on top of them, so that the water could rise a good four feet before it could do any damage.

"Now," Mickey said, when this had been done, "we'll just hope for the best." He went outside and looked at the water.

"It's dropped a full inch!" he called excitedly, and the other men came running to look. "It has! It has!" they cried. The older man shook his head in a pessimistic wag, "Water's been known to drop like that at flood time just before it takes a *real* rise!" he told them.

But he was wrong. Inch by inch the water fell, while Mickey stayed and watched it, fearing that another jam would send it up again.

For two days he never stretched his bones on bed or couch, but kept his eyes glued to the water line; then he

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headed for McMurray, knowing that Mr. Bryan would want to hear the news that his stores were safe.

"Now's my big chance," Mr. Bryan said when he told him. "With the other warehouses gone, I've got practically no competition with trade goods. All we have to do is get the stuff in to the people. And that, Mickey, is *your* job!"

13

IT was well towards the end of May when the Ryan Brothers took their first big load over the Smith Portage for the Lamson-Hibbard Company. Mickey knew that he could not be around long to supervise the transport there, for with summer weather he had to keep the car going between Lac la Biche and McMurray. But he felt he could not miss the beginning of the development of his trail.

It was a shining moment in anticipation; but when he got to Fort Fitzgerald, prepared to use four horses to a wagon, and found that it was impossible to haul the bulky freight they had to handle with such big teams, all delight was forgotten in the hustle, bustle and scuttle of consultations on how to handle the freight, and making the switch-over to suit the new plans.

"You can't use four horses to a team very handy," Mickey decided. "It'd be different if you had a week's haul ahead of you, so you could take a long time and get the heavy freight on the bottom and pile the bulky freight up around the top, in order to get a payload of freight on four horses; but with only one day's haul to do, you can't take the time piling it on careful-like."

"We've got to get more wagons in here," he summed up, consideringly; and Pat agreed.

"It'll mean we'll have to have more drivers, too,"

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Mickey declared, reluctantly, "But I guess there's no way of getting around that expense," he sighed.

They brought in the extra wagons and hitched them, two horses to a team, and the freight began to move slowly across the portage . . . working over one trail until it was so cut up that it became impassable, then moving over a few feet and operating over it, until it, too, was unfit for use.

"Something should be done about this trail," the men would exclaim, as they pushed a wagon out of the mire. "Something should be done about it," they would say again as they inched their way along, grazing the bark off the trees as their heavily piled freight passed painfully through an avenue just too narrow for their load.

Then they would reach an open stretch of firm ground and as they passed a teamster driving a couple of slow oxen, they would gibe and jeer at the driver of the plodding animals, and urge their own powerful horses into a livelier gait.

"Our drivers get to feeling pretty canary behind a couple of good percheron horses," Mickey said uneasily, "But when the teamsters meet in the evening, there'll be fights," he predicted.

He was right.

There were other troubles, too. The men, with no food during the day except the picnic lunch they carried with them, grumbled, when on reaching their destination they had to unload the freight and put it away before they could retire for the night. "After wallowing through mud all day," they would complain, "by the time we get the horses bedded down and ourselves fed, we don't feel like doing no unloading," they grouched every evening; admitting all the while that the freight had to be stored or it would be stolen. "For," they would say quietly in Cree, "it isn't like it used to be before the White Man came, when nothing needed to be locked up. Now nothing is safe unless it's under lock and key."

They would grin and tell how this or that person had

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their whole garden of carrots stolen. "Next year they'll put in a better fence," they'd predict.

Mickey, looking around for some solution of the many problems that arose out of freighting across the portage, suddenly announced, "We'll have to put up a camp at the Halfway."

Only Pat could see anything to be gained by such a measure. "We'll be able to carry heavier loads if we have the stop at the Halfway; and we can leave the loads out all night on the wagon for there's no one around to touch them; and the matter of meals and lunches can be settled by having a cook under the one roof to serve hot meals and put up lunch boxes for the men as they need them."

Everyone else predicted that this was one time when Mickey was making the mistake of his life. "He'll have to haul in hay and feed," they laughed. "He's crazy!"

But Mickey went ahead with his plans, and soon the other teamsters were saying, "Looks like you can lug near a thousand pounds more if you're making the stop at the Halfway," and his competitors started to put up camps beside his.

Tents were the first accommodation the Halfway had to offer. And it was not until they had been pitched for some time that Mickey could begin to plan for more permanent buildings.

To sister Blanche, coming up from New York to spend her vacation with her brothers, the trip across Lake Athabasca, when the boat had been held up by head winds, was the last word in discomfort, she thought. Every day the wind blew, meant another day of her precious holidays gone; and when she reached the Halfway she was so tired that all she wanted to do was flop down in her tent and go to sleep.

"Where can I wash my hands?" she enquired pleasantly, and the brothers pointed to a small tin basin on an up-turned box, with a jug of water standing nearby. "But I mean WASH," she emphasised the word a trifle, and her brother led her to the door. With a wave of the hand that

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took in all the great outdoors, "Anywhere," he told her, hurrying on to tell her that "anywhere" excluded the territory within a radius of a hundred feet from the door.

Everywhere she looked there seemed to be men at work, and Blanche went through that torturous conflict the city woman always goes through when she finds herself deprived of the toilet facilities to which she has become accustomed, but is driven by necessity to use whatever is at hand.

First she decided to wait until she could move into the bush unnoticed ; but the men stayed on at their tasks, and at last she moved out openly, trying to appear as if she were bent on picking berries or gathering flowers or simply investigating the terrain.

Huddling behind a large tree, she was grateful that she had only two days of her vacation to spend at the Halfway.

The next year there was a comfortable shack where the tent had been, and behind it stood a smaller building, neatly painted, with a narrow wooden walk leading from the one building to the other. "We're getting quite towney in our ways," the men commented, eyeing the little house with some pride ; but most of them never used it.

* * * *

When a bird builds a house, it is a sign of mating, and a promise of new birds to come.

When Mickey built his house he had no thought of marriage. But soon slim Katie Poitras was presiding in queenly fashion over the Ryan *ménage*. The thrift of the French was in her fingers, and soon the Halfway House was a changed place. The hum of a sewing machine might mean a new dress or another pair of curtains for a window. Meals were no longer the simple straightforward things the men had prepared, but appetizing, well-flavoured concoctions that sent tantalizing odours through open windows. The ever-present dried apple pies of the North became a tempting luxury when flavoured with a bit of orange peel ;

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and before long there were squares of white flannelette being hand-hemmed in the evenings, small sweaters being knit on fine steel needles, and bootees and mitts being crocheted in intricate patterns from soft Shetland wool.

Mickey nearly lost her when their first child was born.

"You'll go to the hospital in Fort Smith," he had declared ; but she refused.

"I'll have one of the Indian midwives. They know everything to do," she told him, setting her face stubbornly, and he knew it was useless to argue against her.

In her case the Indian midwife did not know ; and for days they despaired of her life as bloodpoisoning having set in, she moaned in agony, and the long trip in to the Fort Smith Hospital did little to advance her on the way to recovery, so that when she was received there the doctor could only shake his head doubtfully as he said, "While there's life there's hope."

He said it without any assurance, but that did not keep him from fighting like a demon, day and night. He fought and continued to fight even when he was convinced he was losing, until the day came when he could say, "She'll get better now."

But it was many days after that before she could sit up, her baby in her arms. When Mickey came to see them, "We'll call him John," she announced, "for your father."

"All he needs is a walrus moustache," Mickey was running his forefinger along the silken cheek, "and he'd be the image of Dad right now."

The coming of the children, one by one, brought many changes besides a baby in the house and a cot against the wall. A cow had to be brought in so that they would have fresh milk on hand and that innovation made others easy. With so much milk and cream on hand cream puffs became a feature of the Halfway House for parties and special occasions. Ice cream could be mixed with far less trouble than it took to bake a pie, and the men were always willing

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to lend a hand to cranking the freezer when a pail of ice cream was in sight.

Soon a delco plant was installed so that they would have their own electric light ; a gramophone could supply music for dancing at a moment's notice, and some of the teamsters began to quit, saying, " It's getting too civilised for my taste. I think I'll push off North where it's quieter."

As the house grew, more buildings mushroomed up around it, a big frame barn, a granary to go with it, a bunkhouse for the teamsters, and the inevitable privvies. The log office where the business was transacted, holding itself aloof in white-collar manner from the log blacksmith shop presided over by Pat Murphy who shod the Ryan horses and kept their harness in repair, and whose chief pride was the century old bellows that had been discarded by the Hudson's Bay Company and salvaged by Mickey Ryan who joyed in taking a turn at blowing it. " It takes me back to the days in Indiana when I used to be in my father's shop," he'd say, and start bragging of the days when he wore a leather apron and could shoe a horse faster and better than any blacksmith twice his age.

Occasionally Pat Murphy would push his big, undinted Stetson hat back on his head, glance sideways at Mickey, and spit before saying dryly, " Musta been quite a lad ! " he would comment. Then, " Why didn't you stick to it, if you was so good at it ? "

" There wasn't any money in it," Mickey would tell him. " Not at a dollar a set ! "

14

THE spring of 1920 came in with rain.

" Rain is something you can't do anything about," Mickey would say to Pat, " so there's no use complaining ! "

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"I'm not complaining for myself," Pat would rejoin. "But you," eyeing the lean figure of his brother, "you're as thin as a rail." A puff at his cigar, then, presently, "Plain wore out, that's what you are!" Another puff, and "I wish you'd never started hauling down the three miles from the end of steel to Christina River." A heart-felt sigh.

"There are times when I wish that, too," Mickey admitted at last, "But if you take on a job you've got to see it through. And I took on this one, knowing it wasn't going to be easy."

"But with the weather so bad there isn't any money in it," Pat protested. "By the time you hitch four horses to a wagon, and even with that you can only pull a thousand pounds and can't make but two trips a day; you'd be better off without the business!"

The next day the road became worse, and now the wagons refused to budge out of the mud, bogged as they were above their axles in the mire.

"With so much fresh fruit and meat and stuff to take down," Mickey said, "we've got to make the trip." The men laughed at him. "We've just got to make the trip," Mickey said again, but he knew as he spoke that no wheel could turn in the sludgy trail they must cover.

"At this rate it'll take us two months to haul down what we could haul in two days if the roads were good," he complained. Then, "What makes me mad is, the Fort McMurray Board of Trade crowing over me losing money like this," he said, his face flushed. "They've been doing so much kicking about me making money easy when I could put up the freight and have it down to Christina within a day and a half. Now they'll be gloating over my bad luck."

He sat, his head between his hands for a long moment, while he writhed at the thought of being an object of mirth.

Then, suddenly, he was up and active again. With hammer and saw busy, he gave instructions towards the

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building of a stone boat . . . a toboggan-like affair that would permit itself to be dragged over the mud even when heavily loaded.

"I've seen a farmer use this kind of thing on a ploughed field," one of the men said, "But it wasn't muddy," he added doubtfully.

"I figure it'll work," Mickey said with confidence ; but it was not until it had been hitched and loaded and proved itself that the men would believe it could be used.

"Well, it's a lot better than having your axles drag with the wagons coming up the hill," was as much as his teamsters would say ; but soon his competitors were busy building mud boats for themselves. "Only we gotta get more for hauling the freight," they said. "Oughta get at least \$2.50 a hundredweight if you have to haul this way," they decided.

Within the day the District Manager of the Hudson's Bay Company came to Mickey. "Those fellows have been hauling for us for years," he said angrily, "Now they're taking advantage of the extra bad weather to hold us up for more money. I don't mind paying you that much," he told Mickey, "but I won't pay it to them," he said stubbornly. "Could you give us some help?" He waited for an answer.

"Well, it's this way," Mickey drawled, "I don't believe in kicking anybody's pants just because I can ; and I could haul freight on my back and make big money at a dollar a hundred, and I'll haul what freight I can for you."

The District Manager opened his mouth to voice his gratitude, but Mickey cut him short with, "The reason we keep the freight rate up to a dollar a hundredweight is to provide against weather conditions." It started to rain again as he spoke. "It's an awful high rate when it's not raining," he admitted, "But in weather like this——" He let the sentence trail off as he started to build another boat.

* * * *

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Now work started on the railway again, and the summer of 1920 saw steel laid as far as Waterways, a point three miles short of McMurray.

The Board of Trade of that city let out a mighty roar now. "It's a double-cross!" they cried, "It's a gyp," and they sent out more letters of protest. For some unknown reason they still held Mickey Ryan responsible for having Waterways made the terminal instead of McMurray, in spite of the fact that the laying of steel that far, had thrown him out of his winter's work as the railway could carry the mail as soon as the road-bed froze over.

"He fixed it so we couldn't get the railway in," they declared firmly, against all argument. "There's no knowing how he did it, but he fixed it!"

The winter of 1920 passed slowly for Mickey. Accustomed as he was to a busy season, he could not settle down into the near-hibernation the rest of the townsfolk seemed to enjoy, so that the spring found him longing for a horse under him, a trail before him and work to do.

It was a busy, happy, successful summer, and already the sixteen miles between Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald was beginning to have money spent on it. "We'll just have to build up the worst spots first," he declared, "but with a little time spent on it, it'll be a road yet!"

* * * *

Shortly before the election in 1921, the Government put through a call to Mickey to take his automobile in from Lac la Biche to Edmonton and pick up Mr. J. R. Boyle the Attorney General of the Province, who wanted to go to Athabasca Landing to address a political meeting.

Mickey responded gladly. And when he reached the city, Mr. Boyle climbed aboard the car; they made the switch over to the Canadian National Railway tracks, and set out for the Landing.

"I missed the regular train up to Athabasca," Mr.

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Boyle began, "And the roads are entirely too bad to think of going up there by automobile. You'd get your liver shaken to bits by the time you got there and——" Whatever Mr. Boyle might have added was lost in the noise of the car as it "let itself out" on the track; and there were moments during the long ride northwards when he wished that he had taken the trip by road; for he was sure that it would have dealt out less punishment than he was receiving from the Ryan "Velocipede."

When they got to Athabasca Landing, Mickey ran his car on to a siding, and he and his passenger went forward so that Mr. Boyle might greet the crowd that had gathered to gape at the odd looking vehicle that had just arrived.

"Hi, Mickey! How's things?" came with delight from all sides as they recognised the former mail-carrier. "You never come this way no more," they told him regretfully, wringing his hand.

Mr. Boyle twirled his walrus moustache, "You seem to be well known up here," he said to Mickey consideringly.

"I used to run the mail out of here with dogs for a while," Mickey told him. "I know most of the people around here," he added casually.

"Do you know the coloured settlement?" Mr. Boyle wanted to know.

Mickey nodded.

"George Mills tells me he doesn't think they're going to vote our ticket, and we need their vote, bad." Then, "I think you'd better go out there with us, seeing as you know them. You see," he went on, "my knowledge of them is pretty limited." He was still working at the walrus moustache. "When they came up here from Oklahoma looking for a place to settle——" He cleared his throat significantly, indicating that it was a ticklish subject to talk about. "I heard about them then, of course; but I never heard of them again after they were taken out of the Immigration Hall and sent up to Pine Creek."

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Mickey nodded again. "They've done a wonderful work out there," he commented. "When they got the grant to that piece of land up there at Pine Creek everyone thought it'd be the death of them, for it was the poorest piece of land in the country. But they had a preacher that kind of took the lead and ran them all." Mr. Boyle tucked his hands under the back of his swallow-tail coat and listened intently as Mickey went on, "They used to come in here with their feet all wrapped up in gunny sacks. Lobstick shoes they used to call them," he grinned.

"Well, we'll have to go up there and get their vote," Mr. Boyle said out of his owl-face, "But you'll have to go with us. You may be able to swing their vote."

"I'll be glad to go out there with you," Mickey said, but committed himself no further.

They drove out the fourteen miles to Pine Creek, and pulled up beside two or three old Model-T Ford cars that were parked in front of the low log building that was the local schoolhouse. When they went in, they found it packed to the doors with coloured people who were waiting for the meeting to start.

Mickey stood back against the wall with Mr. Mills, the former Liberal Member for that constituency, at his elbow, as Mr. Boyle took his place on the platform, to be introduced by the preacher, whose face shone coal-black above his spotless white collar.

"Mr. Boyle's sure giving them the works," Mickey commented as the Honourable Member thanked his audience for their support in the past and made wild promises in return for continued loyalty in the future . . . promises that became increasingly extravagant with each quarter hour ticked off by the clock.

When he had completely run out of promises, he sat down and the preacher got to his feet.

Mickey nudged Mr. Mills' elbow. "He's moved along a lot since he came up here," he chuckled. "Look at

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those spats he's wearing ! ” A few moments later, “ That's pretty flowery language he's handing out, all right,” Mickey said into Mr. Mills's ear.

Mr. Mills looked pale in the yellow lamplight ; for now the preacher's voice lost its oiliness and he was saying, bluntly, that he and his people had no intention of supporting their present member. A change was what they wanted. A change they were determined to get !

This made clear, he returned to his first affability. Turning to Mr. Boyle, with a voice full of the Old South, he said graciously, “ Now Mr. Boyle, any differences that we have, I want you to understand, is just political differences . . . just political differences . . . Hereafter, we will be just as good friends *sociably* as we ever were ! ”

* * * *

The winter of 1921 followed hard upon the heels of the one before it ; and again Mickey faced long months of inactivity. But now he found his nerves raw at the edges, and the way a man would whittle with a knife could set his teeth on edge ; a phrase repeated once too often might bring an angry oath ; and an overdone gesture stir him into uncontrollable irritation. He suspected he was “ bushed,” and he went to Edmonton to escape it.

Once there, he knew that while the city could provide diversion, it did not give him the wholesome satisfaction he derived from work. He must find something to do during the winter months. Something that would keep him alert and alive through the long, dark winter days when one was prone to sink into a slough of depression that it was difficult to get out of.

“ The people to the North of us, up Fort Fitzgerald and Fort Smith way, never get any reading material or parcels after the winter sets in. They've got to wait for the first boat to come in in the spring. If the country is to open up, they should get all their mail right the winter through.

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The white women up there, they get bushed," he told the Post Office officials. "If mail went in, say, once or twice a month, no woman would hesitate about living up there," he urged.

"What do you propose?" they wanted to know.

Mickey outlined his plan. "It seems natural to take horses in there," he said quietly. "That way you could take in the first class mail, and all the books and papers and stuff they need, too."

"Horses have never been used up as far as Fort Smith," they reminded him, "But if you think it could be done, we'll give you the mail and let you try it out."

Assured of a thousand pounds of mail to carry in, Mickey got in touch with the Hudson's Bay Company and the free traders. "It costs you a dollar a pound now to get your furs out in the wintertime," he started. "If you give me the hauling of them, I'll make you a price of 75 cents from Fort Smith and 50 cents from Chipewyan, just to get going," he told them. "No use to haul back empty sleds." He was quiet for a while. Then, presently, "And if there's any freight you want lugged in, I'll take it in with me for half the usual rates."

Soon Mickey had enough freight lined up to warrant the use of half a dozen sleighs, and as many horses.

Hay had to be hauled from the meadows along Hay River, then loaded on barges and taken down stream to be placed in piles twenty miles apart along the route the horses would take to Fort Smith. Oats was brought in and stored along the trail, too; the utmost care being taken to protect it from marauding animals and the rotting influence of the weather.

"With the price of feed so high, and it so hard to get," Pat told him, "We'll be in the hole pretty bad if this horse scheme of yours doesn't work out."

"I don't see why it shouldn't work," Mickey said, "It's natural to go on to horses, it seems to me. Besides," he

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went on, "dogs are an awful expense. The way they can eat!" he marvelled, "and the small amount they can haul!"

The people of McMurray were delighted when they heard of his new plan to haul mail and freight with horses from the railhead to Fort Smith, and bring back furs for the Hudson's Bay Company and free traders.

"Until the railway pushes in there, that's going to remain the territory of the huskie teams," they predicted. "This will finish him," they said with loud guffaws, "Those horses of his will make tasty eating for the timber wolves!"

"Yeah," one of the old timers agreed, spitting at a crack in the floor with satisfaction, "and the derved fool building the sleighs the way he's doing!"

"Yeah, doesn't know how to save himself at all. Could a bought sleighs—lots of them—regular size; but no, *he* has to build them himself," he jeered.

"What good does he think it's going to do, making them sleighs three inches wider and four feet shorter?" one of the other men wanted to know. "I could understand him figuring if he made the *whole* sleigh bigger, longer and wider both; but three inches wider and four feet shorter, it don't make sense." He shook his head. "It'll never work, he told them and himself. "Horse sleighs have been made the regulation length for a long time now. I don't see no need to change."

"I don't figure he'll get very far out before he comes limping back here, and when he does he'll be lucky if he has his six cayuses with him. A horse can't stand travel in this country. They ain't built for it." A slight pause, then, "They say their lungs blow up when the weather gets real cold!"

"Yeah, I don't think we'll have to bother much longer about Mr. Mickey Ryan. He was bound to finish hisself off some time; but now I think the time has come!"

15

"THERE'S been a terrible fire at Fitzgerald!"

Mickey looked up from the wood he was sawing as the District Manager of the Hudson's Bay Company came into the barn where he was working.

"Anybody killed?" Mickey wanted to know, his face drawn with sympathy.

"No . . . but our warehouses were burnt to the ground!" He did not have to tell Mickey what that would mean with loss of supplies to the people around Fort Fitzgerald. Whites, Indians and Metis alike would suffer at the destruction of a year's provisions.

"It'll go pretty hard with them this winter then." Mickey began to saw again, for time was pressing and he wanted to get the flat sleighs ready for the trip North.

"Yes," the District Manager agreed. "It's likely to be the worst winter they've ever known; for all our boats have been hauled out and the crews have gone, so we can't ship them anything from here."

Mickey laid down the saw, and picking up pencil and square began to mark the clean wood with simple pattern. "It wouldn't do any good if you did have the crews and boats," he said flatly, "It's almost the end of October. Lake Athabasca would be frozen before they got there."

"Still, it seems kind of hard not to make some effort to get some food, at least, to them," the District Manager pressed the point.

Mickey went over a line, making it dark and heavy before saying anything; then, "I couldn't go alone anyway," he declared, "And I don't think I could get anyone to go with me."

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The District Manager's face lit up at this indication that Mickey might think of going. "Oh, sure, you could get someone to go with you," he assured him. Then, in order to clinch the deal, "I'll go and start making arrangements about getting the boats loaded."

He turned and went, leaving Mickey to sound out the townspeople for volunteers to take relief to the people of Fort Fitzgerald.

"You're crazy!" the first man said, "Lake Athabasca'll be frozen over before you get there. You'll never get through."

"You'll have to walk back," the next man said, shaking his head.

One after another they refused to go. Then Billy Loutit, an *improved Scotchman*, said, "I won't let you go alone, Mickey!" he declared, "but," he added in his rich heather-tinged accent, "It's folly trying!"

Mickey looked at him gratefully, but said nothing. Billy Loutit was one of the best pilots in Northern parts, and he would be safer with him than with anyone. How safe that would be, he did not dare think!

When it came time to pull out and Billy Loutit saw the three barges loaded down with freight and the two gas boats, he said gravely in the Cree that was the tongue of his mother, "We'll never get there!" Then his face set, "But no one can ever say we didn't try!"

"It's the twenty-second of October," Billy Loutit said into the sleet that pelted at them, "We can't expect it to be pleasant."

"It's disagreeable weather," Mickey agreed in simple understatement, "But I figure the people at Fort Fitzgerald are going to be pretty miserable this winter if they don't get some supplies."

"I still think it's crazy to attempt the trip," Billy Loutit stepped into one of the boats and in a moment they were put-putting away from McMurray; but before they

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had gone very far one of the engines coughed, flickered and stopped ; then the other echoed her.

"It's just that there's some ice getting into the wells," Mickey said through tight lips, "And now," he declared, "I suppose I'll be kept busy running from one engine to the other keeping the ice from being sucked up into them."

He was right.

For five days the wind blew ; the sleet changed to snow, then back to sleet again ; and the engines had to be nursed along in order to keep them going. And on the fifth day out of McMurray, sandbars were added to their misery.

"There's one thing about a good pilot like you," Mickey said, as they ran on to the eighth sandbar that day, "you never get us stuck *bad* !"

* * * *

"We're coming to Lake Athabasca !" Mickey said soon after that, his eyes running estimatingly over the water, trying to forecast the condition of the lake.

"I figure it's frozen," Billy laid the words flatly in front of Mickey.

"It's getting too dark to see much of a ways ahead," Mickey said as they moved on towards the Lake, "but——" The rest of his sentence was drowned in a wave of disappointment.

"Froze solid !" Billy said as they came up to the ice barrier and halted.

Mickey could not trust himself to say anything. He had lost two days of loading and five days of freighting so far in order to take the supplies to a starving community, only to be thwarted in his attempt, and he was resentful of the time he was losing from his work on the flat sleighs.

"There's nothing to do," Billy said quietly, "except make a cache of this freight," he was heading for the shore, "and make ourselves as comfortable as we can until the river freezes over enough for us to walk back to McMurray."

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Mickey was overwhelmed at the thought of the ribbing he would take back in McMurray for his folly in ever having started out for Fitzgerald. "We'll have a nice rest anyway," he said, and they pulled into shore and made camp.

"We'll have plenty of time to-morrow to unload the freight," Billy said when they had eaten, so they rolled themselves in for the night.

Mickey could not sleep. A coyote screeched in the distance and he rolled over. It screeched again, and he rolled back. His anger kept mounting at his failure to carry out his mission, and unaccustomed as he was to frustration, he could not accept it as easily as Billy did.

And now the wind seemed to feel his anger, and it stirred itself into a gale. Bitter and swift it came on wings of fury, Bitter and Swift !

But its coming brought only joy to Mickey's heart ; and he lay very still, listening as it went past him ; listening, and considering how it blew.

Would it blow hard enough and sharp enough to break up the ice in the lake ? Or could that rubber-like sheet resist its onslaught until, worn out, it had to rest ?

Would the ice hold ? Or would it break up, as he dared hope ?

He could not lie still now, and he got up and moved out where he could watch the lake. "It's got to break," he told himself, not because he saw any sign of weakening, but because his hope was so strong.

And now he was rummaging through the freight until he came to a parcel, earmarked for P. H. Godsell of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Fitzgerald. He chuckled as he hauled out Godsell's "permit," and carried the bottle of brandy up to the camp, deeply grateful for the law which permitted every white man in the North to have a "Permit" of liquor, to be used as medicine through the long winter days.

"Sit up and have a drink," he called to Loutit, "while

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"I get breakfast!" He opened the bottle and poured a good-sized drink which he handed to his companion; then went about frying bacon, making bannock and boiling coffee.

As he worked he talked to Billy, praising his prowess as a river pilot, recalling the days when he had taken the *Old Athabasca* from Athabasca Landing to Fort McMurray. "You were a better man than the rest of them," he told Billy. "You could go places no one else could go."

He poured another glass of brandy, and now Billy took up the recital. "I never was scared of nothing," he said, sipping at his drink with enjoyment.

Mickey tried to keep his eyes off the lake as he talked, but they kept straying that way.

At first when the break-up came, he thought his eyes might be deceiving him; but soon he knew that the wind had accomplished her task. She had defeated her enemy . . . and his.

He could tell now that she was tiring. He eyed the sky consideringly. "Just getting her breath for another bout," he told himself; then to Billy, "Looks like the ice in the lake has broken up," he said casually, "guess, maybe we can keep going."

Billy got up immediately. "Nothing to stop us!" he steadied himself on his feet with an effort. "It's just about daylight," he continued, "Should get on our way!" and Mickey started to break camp.

"We've got to pull into Chipewyan," Mickey said, as soon as they got out on the lake. "We've got some parcels and mail and stuff to drop off."

Billy nodded. "We can't afford to lose any time though," he warned, "for the wind has gone down. And you know how it is—as soon as it gets calm all this ice is likely to freeze together in the lake water here."

"We'll make the call into Chipewyan a fast one," Mickey promised, and they did; pulling in, shoving the parcels and mail at whoever was closest before climbing

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back into the boats and starting the engines with only a few hurried words of greeting and explanation.

"Let's get out of the Lake as fast as we can," Mickey called to Billy, and they were off, with cries of farewell, and wishes for good luck from the natives on the beach, ringing in their ears.

They got out of the lake and on to the Rocher River before the wind returned. Having befriended them once, now she turned against them, bringing with her a blinding snow storm, so that they were forced to tie up by the river bank.

"After all, it's only sixty miles to Fitzgerald. We can leave the stuff here and it can be packed the rest of the way," Billy Loutit was cheering himself up with another glass of brandy.,

"I'd like to get it delivered," Mickey's jaw set stubbornly.

"We'll never get it there," Billy said thickly. "Darned lucky to get it this far." He sat in silent gloom for a long moment. Then, "And if I hadn't been drinking that brandy you gave me," he told Mickey, "I'd never have taken a chance on going on to the Lake."

Mickey nodded, and grinned.

"How about calling quits now?" Billy persisted. "It looks like we couldn't get any farther anyway."

"I hate to give up," Mickey declared. He was watching the snow anxiously, hoping for some indication that it would stop.

Twenty-four hours spun themselves out slowly before it cleared; and as soon as Mickey had shovelled the snow off the barges and boats, they cut loose and started out.

"We can't make much headway with the river running so thick with ice," Billy apologized over and over again.

"If we keep bumping ice like this," Mickey said, "Pretty soon there won't be any bottom in the boats."

Billy scowled. "The way this ice keeps clawing at you, it's hard to know what to do." He was silent for a

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while. Then, "I'd say, maybe we'd better shut off the engines and drift downstream."

There was nothing they could do now to help themselves. They could only sit and let themselves be carried like a piece of driftwood towards their destination. And now the cold crept up on them, carrying with it a depression that was overwhelming. The brandy bottle lay empty at Billy's feet and every once in a while he would mutter darkly that if he ever got out of this alive he would never leave his own fireside again.

Mickey assured him that his own thoughts were running along similar lines, when Billy stood up in the boat.

"Fort Fitzgerald!" he cried, and then again, "Fort Fitzgerald!"

There was no depression in either of the men now. The sight of the little fort meant the accomplishment of their mission, and for a moment they allowed themselves to delight in the intoxication of their hard-won success. Then they began to work their way in towards the settlement, while people came running down to the wharf to greet them, yelling and cheering with joy as they saw the heavily loaded barges and realized that their winter would not be a cheerless one after all.

Harry Godsell, and Lego, the Post Manager, were the first down to cry welcome. "I don't know how you made it, Mickey," Harry's hearty voice rang out, "We'd given up all hope of relief when the ice started to run so thick. His voice held in it knowledge of years when flood and fire had left him without provisions throughout the dark, depressing days of a Northern winter.

Mickey was making every move count now. With expert aim he threw the ropes of the barges to the man on shore. Then he and Loutit climbed into the best gas boat, which they had already packed with their provisions for the return journey, and untying their craft, began to back away from the wharf.

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"Aren't you coming ashore?" Harry Godsell called out in dismay.

"No!" Mickey called back.

"But what are we to do about this freight?" Lego was in a panic.

Mickey chuckled. "Listen to them," he said to Billy, "Ahollering away because we're not going to check the stuff in and get a receipt for it!" Then, raising his voice, "I hope to see you around Christmas," he yelled, and with a wave of the hand he headed the boat towards home.

"This is a mighty handy little gas boat," he commented, as they dodged in and out of the ice, and when they got well started, "You'd better sleep in the day time," he told Billy, "so you can take over at night."

They went up the Slave River to the junction of the Rocher and Peace Rivers; then along the Peace to the Quatre Fourches. As soon as they got on the Quatre Fourches it turned mild, and hope began to run pretty high in the two men, for there wasn't a sign of ice to be seen.

"At this rate we'll get into Chipewyan before daylight," Mickey said, "We'll get what gasoline we need there." Billy grinned happily, and Mickey went on, "What a joke it's going to be on all of them when we get back to McMurray without——!"

The sentence never was finished, for at that moment the boat shot right on to solid ice.

Billy's disappointment was beyond words, and the two men sat for a moment in bitter silence, before Mickey said resignedly, "Well, this is the end of our journey, it seems."

Billy smiled wryly, but said nothing.

"We'd better get the boat back in the water," Mickey suggested at last, "and go back to the Rocher River where we can maybe pick up some trappers or some Indians around the mouth of the Peace; and they'll maybe help us portage the boat around the rapids on the Rocher."

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Billy nodded. "There is quite a fall there late in the year when the water is low," he warned, "We don't want to run into too much trouble."

They succeeded in getting help across the Rapids, and were looking forward, yearningly, to reaching Chipewyan, but three miles out of there they ran on to solid ice again. So they were forced to walk into Chipewyan to get help with hauling the boat out; and by the time they could get back to the settlement and tumble into bed, they were ready to sleep the clock around.

"We've got to start getting back to McMurray," Mickey said on their second day there, and Billy agreed.

"No use attryin' to go," the natives advised. "Not until it freezes up some more. You'd lose your dog team at the first creek you tried to cross."

"I thought we'd just tramp."

They tried to dissuade him, but, "I've lost enough time already," he said firmly. "I've got to get my flat sleighs ready, then I'll be back up here."

"You go now," one Indian grunted, "and you never come back nohow."

"I've got to take a chance," Mickey's voice was full of determination, as he made for Colin Fraser's store where he picked out the supplies they would need for their long journey.

"You'll not be able to get along without at least four pairs of moccasins each, besides what you've got on," and when Mickey tried to protest that they could get along on less, "They'll get wet awful fast in this weather; wear out quick, too," Colin Fraser was firm. "If you don't have your feet comfortable you'll never make the trip," he shoved the moccasins at Mickey. "A man may go hungry," he said, stopping to touch a match to his pipe, "but if his feet are unhappy, he's miserable all over."

"I'll be seeing you soon, I hope," Mickey said, when he

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had hoisted his packful of provisions on his back, and the natives gathered to say good-bye.

"Good luck!" they wished him gravely, and the long trek started.

16

"I'M glad we kept our load down to the minimum," Mickey grunted as they stopped for a short rest. "Even with just the food and snowshoes and this small axe," he chopped at a small spruce as he spoke, "I feel as if we're not travelling any too light."

"I've carried as high as four hundred pounds at a time," Billy said, "but it felt lighter than that pack of mine," he said, shovelling back the snow with one of his snowshoes, making it ready for the couch of spruce boughs Mickey was chopping.

"As long as the rivers are not solid, we'll have to keep to the bush," Billy mourned later, "and what between climbing over fallen timber, and not being able to wear the snowshoes, I don't know but what we ought to wait for better conditions," he hinted.

"You can wait if you like," Mickey said, "but I've got to go on. I've got the flat sleighs to finish."

"As long as you're going, I'll keep with you," Billy promised, "but," he added, "if you should kill yourself, remember I advised you to stay back in Chipewyan and wait for better weather."

Mickey grinned. "I've got to get back," was all he said.

"We're lucky that we've got plenty of wood," Mickey said now, starting to build a second fire.

"Yeah, might as well have two fires while we can," Billy agreed, "Later on we may not be able to get enough

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wood easy ; and with no blankets to sleep under, we kind of need the heat from two fires."

"I'll look after this one," Mickey threw down a faggot beside the new fire. "You look after that," he nodded towards the other.

Their eyes were heavy with sleep now, but all through the long night the fires had to be tended and kept going, and they would drop off to sleep only to wake with a start as their hands started to numb, to remake the fires.

This would go on until daylight came, demanding that they start hiking again.

"Eighteen inches of snow and can't wear snowshoes !" Billy grumbled as they floundered along. Then, "It gets worse all the time," he complained.

"Now what'll we do ?" he demanded as they came to an icebound creek. "Do you suppose that crust is strong enough to hold us ?" he asked, eyeing the wide expanse of ice doubtfully.

"We couldn't trust it," Mickey said slowly, "It looks pretty thin in the middle to me." He was probing at it with his eyes as he spoke. "We'd have to zig-zag our way across anyway, and," he set his pack down on the bank and soon was tying a piece of rope around it, leaving a long end, to which he tied a piece of light string. Then, as he started to coil it neatly, he said to Loutit, "we'll have to get across ourselves first, then pull the packs after us."

"Now ! All set ?" Mickey asked and Billy grunted.

"We can't walk across," Mickey figured aloud, "we'd go through for sure."

Billy did not answer. Already he was rolling himself gently on to the ice, and Mickey followed his example.

Halfway over, Billy rose on his elbow and looked around. "It looks kind of weak right in front of us," he cautioned. Then, "It might be better to roll upstream a ways before going across."

Mickey mumbled his agreement as he ran a considering

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eye over the string coiled in his hand. "I can't go up too far," he told Billy at last, "I haven't got an awful lot of string on the packs."

"Better we should lose all our provisions than we should lose the provisions and ourselves, too," Billy replied.

Now Mickey could feel the end of the string and the beginning of the rope. "I've got to head right across," he said flatly, and headed for the other side.

"You go ahead," Billy said, rolling over slowly, pausing to examine the ice before every turn.

Mickey reached the other side, and waited patiently for Billy to join him. "I hope we get the packs over as safe as we did," Mickey said, pulling lightly on the string, and starting to wind it over the three fingers of his left hand.

Slowly the packs began to move like great seals, while Mickey watched for any sign of break-up in the ice.

As soon as they passed the half way mark, he heaved a sigh of relief, and started to pull a little more quickly on the rope. This was the signal to the ice for action. It opened up like a trap-door and the packs dropped through.

Billy Loutit let out a cry of dismay, and caught at the rope Mickey was holding. For the next few minutes he kept hurling out instructions in Cree, Chipewyan, French and English; but in his excitement his English became so thick with Scottish accent that Mickey could not understand him.

"Pull! Pull!" he cried in all languages, the "Chip-jegay" of the Cree coming most frequently, and soon the packs were out of the water and back on the ice again. Then they had to be coaxed to the river bank, and when they were safe and ready to be hoisted for packing, Billy said with fervour, "I hope we don't have to go through much of *that*!"

But they did; for all the way to McMurray the ice kept running in the river so that they had to keep to the bank, making occasional lengthy detours around sloughs, zig-zagging their way across creeks, and climbing over fallen timber, until when they staggered into McMurray after

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ten days of tramping, they were like ghosts of the men who had left with the gas boats such a short time before.

"My gosh, Mick," Pat said with concern, as he welcomed them back, "You're thin as a rail. Must have lost thirty pounds, at least," he estimated.

"Yes, I guess I have," Mickey admitted wearily. Then, "I'll soon pick it up," he promised. "And now I've got to get rested, for I'll have to start work on the flat sleighs to-morrow."

"Now, looka, Mick," Pat said gravely, "you weighed a hundred and sixty-five pounds when you left here. To-day you don't weigh more than a hundred and thirty, if you weigh that. Whyn't you rest for a few days?" he pleaded.

"I can't," Mickey told him "I've got my mind set on starting hauling with horses in the North-West Territories this winter and——"

"The North-West Territories have done without horses this long," Pat bristled. "It won't hurt them none to have to wait a little longer."

"When I get taken with a notion," Mickey explained, "it just won't let me be until I get it carried out."

With that he fell asleep, and next morning he was working again on the flat sleighs.

17

CHRISTMAS Eve came, bringing with it visitors who came by dog team for many miles to the little settlement in order to participate in the Midnight Mass with which the Northern settlements usher in the Holy Day. The teams had a gala air, with every dog wearing a brightly beaded tuppie across his back; and a fox tail fastened to his collar, wired and worn as a plume above his head.

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"*Holy night ! Silent Night !*" the dark-eyed children carolled as they trooped towards the log building, shepherded by a Grey Nun, who urged them to "Sing out, but keep it sweet !"

The little church was full to overflowing, for everyone, white, dark or in-between goes to the Mass to see the Christmas in. The important "whites" sitting in the front pews, man and wife together. Behind them the Indians, Breeds and Metis, the men on one side of the church and the women on the other, with the late-comers forced to stand against the walls.

The small Quebec Heaters had been well fuelled and soon the air was fetid with the stench of smoked deerskin and unwashed bodies. Mickey had to smile as the occupants of the front pews began to squirm and fidget as their nostrils protested against the smell. But the Indians, though conscious of the woodsy odour, worshipped happily, for to them it meant that new moccasins were being worn in honour of the coming of the Festival . . . moccasins, beaded and embroidered lovingly and with pride, to be worn first to the church where they would pass noiselessly before the altar, and then on Christmas Day they would be scuffed and worn out in the "Heel and Toe," "Eight Drops of Brandy" and "Left Hand Reels," that started at two o'clock in the afternoon and did not stop until well on in the following day.

The New Year dawned and Mickey kept pushing his plans towards the trip to Fort Smith ; but January was well on its way before he could give the word to go.

Wearing a small pair of snowshoes he set out at the head of the caravan, breaking trail ; and after four days of hard travelling they pulled up beside the pink mud cabins of Lobstick Point.

Everyone in the settlement came rushing to greet Mickey and his men, but Adam, the oldest of the group, shook his head mournfully. Calling Mickey by the Cree

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name of "Kee-chi-moguman," he predicted dire happenings if he proceeded with the horses towards Fort Smith.

"This seventy-five miles you have already come, you may think is hard. But continue on your way," he warned solemnly, "and you will learn why the Company thought this country should be left for fur."

"You don't think I can make the trip?" Mickey asked, and for a moment Fear plucked at the edges of his mind. These Indians had been known to predict happenings with the utmost accuracy.

Adam drew himself to his full height, then said with dignity, "How could you make the trip! Even with dogs it is a trip to try a man . . . open water, overhanging ice, blizzards——!" His voice trailed off, indicating that it would be useless to attempt a recital of all the hazards of the journey. Then, "With a light dog sled, one might cross a treacherous piece of ice with only a sousing or two, but," he eyed the heavy sleds, "with a heavy horse and sled, you'd be inviting trouble."

Mickey chuckled now, his fear gone. He had been hearing predictions like this ever since he had announced that he would go North with horses. "The McMurray Board of Trade has given us all that guff a hundred times over," Mickey said and Adam's face became very grave.

"Kee-chee-moguman," he said with affection, "You are good friend to all the Indians. I ask you not to throw your life away!"

Mickey could not help but be touched by the anxiety in Adam's voice and he hurried to assure him that he would take the best care he could of his life, but finished with a firm, "I've got to go."

On January the 29th, they left the Athabasca River and in spite of warnings that the Embarrass River was full of airholes, Mickey decided to take that route. "With the cold weather we're having we'll get firm ice," he told the men, and they started out.

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"It's quite a short cut," Mickey said, eyeing the stretch of ice before them with confidence; but his confidence was short-lived, for without any warning, the ice went from under their lead horse, and in a second only his head was above water.

Quick as winking, Mickey undid the traces, and calling to Fred Conboy to fling a rope around the horse's neck, they set to work to get the frightened animal out of the icy water.

"Jerk tight on the rope," Mickey ordered and Fred pulled hard, so that the horse was forced to draw in a deep breath. Immediately he floated up to the surface of the water, and with the help of a couple of other men, they rolled him out on the ice where he got to his feet and tried to get back into the water, for now the frost was nipping at his wet body that shivered and protested against the cold air.

"Get one of the rabbit-skins," Mickey called, and one of the teamsters went to his sleigh for the warm rabbit-skin robe which Mickey threw over the horse, whose coat was already freezing in the cold wind.

"Now run him up and down until he warms up," Mickey ordered, and they took turns exercising him until he was ready to be harnessed back to the sleigh again.

During the next ten miles not one of the horses escaped a dip in the icy water, and the men began to complain bitterly. "It's bad enough when we can keep our hands dry, but getting them into the water like this without any protection, in *this weather*, is——!" They'd break off helplessly then and mutter that it just tempted the frost to bite.

The weather resorted to every trick she knew to hold them up, so that it was the end of the ninth day before they arrived at Reid's Camp, which Mickey figured to be close to the halfway mark on their journey.

"It'll be much better farther along," Mickey promised them, "There's so much overflow on the river ice that makes

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this slush pile in front of the sleighs, and it having to be cleared off, it makes it kind of hard," he sympathized, ignoring the bigger evils of frostbite and airholes; and never once did he mention the possibility of losing either horse or sled in the water, although the fear was always with him.

If the crews were working eighteen hours a day, Mickey was working almost the full twenty-four, for he had to go ahead on snowshoes and cruise out the most direct route for the sleighs to follow.

"With the weather so much against us, and then people back in McMurray praying for us to fail, we've got to be extra careful," he told the men, "so I'm marking the route out with spruce boughs. And," he chuckled, "I'm sticking in boughs that *are* boughs, with no chance of them being sunk in a good fall of snow, or hidden in a drift!"

The men gibed a little at his earnestness and the size of his boughs; but when two days later, they got into Chipewyan and found that a party of Indians that had left Fort McMurray with a dog team at the same time they had, had not yet put in an appearance and had, therefore, been given up as lost, they blessed the green boughs that had guided them.

It was the fourth of February when they arrived at Chipewyan, and they were held there by a sixty mile gale that dared even a dog team to show its face on the trail. While in every wigwam, every house, shop and building, pow-pows were being held declaring that this country was not for horses. Only dogs could haul. And one fearful voice said, "Suppose he *does* haul with horses. What will *we* do?" There was grave silence.

"His horses are fat as seals under their blankets. They have not suffered much; suppose they *do* make this trip what of us? What of us, the dog drivers? How will we live? Will the white man take from us this way of life, too? And if he does, will we starve?"

"He'll never be able to finish the trip," one of the

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older men spoke assuringly. "He is little more than half way to Fort Fitzgerald now. There is still to be passed the lake where the wind plays all winter at piling the snow in drifts as high as a man standing. There are, too, the Rapids where the water will be open, and to cut a trail through the bush is tiresome work. Then there will be overhanging ice and airholes at the junction of the Rochers and the Peace." Dark heads nodded in agreement and brown faces lifted. "He will either turn back or be lost," he finished, cocking an ear at the wind that was threatening destruction to anyone who ventured forth against its lashing.

* * * *

"Well, the worst is over," Mickey said on the morning of the tenth of February, when the wind had spent itself. "We might as well get going."

Get going they did, but for the first ten miles out of Chipewyan they had to break trail, which meant that the horses had to be unhitched from the sleds, to follow in single file behind Mickey who tramped ahead on his snow-shoes to mark a way for them to follow. Occasionally, where the snow had piled in a drift too deep to cross, they would have to stop and shovel their way through, until they reached a place where they could tramp a trail out for themselves. A few miles of this and they would retrace their steps, pick up the sleds, and move their valuable cargo another lap closer to Fort Smith.

"It'll be easier when we get along a little ways," Mickey encouraged them. "Here, the wind's got a clean sweep of over two hundred miles across the lake, and it comes along pretty strong."

"We had a good rest at Chipewyan," one of the teamsters said, shovelling hard at a snowdrift, "We can stand a little hardship. But," he offered, "I'm glad it came the first day out."

The next day the outfit came to open water at the

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Rochers River rapids, and the men were ready to turn back, but Mickey kept them going. "We can get around the rapids," he told them, "Besides," he encouraged, "it'll be sheltered in the bush."

And now the men had to take axes and slash their way through the bush. "It's sheltered all right," one of the teamsters said bitterly, "But I'd just as soon have to shovel snow as swing an axe," he complained.

Four miles of trail-chopping and they were ready for sleep. The next morning they were forced to get back to their shovels again, and though they started work at three in the morning and did not camp until midnight, they covered only three miles in their long day.

"Nothing could be worse than this!" the men said over and over that night; but they were to find that overhanging ice and airholes at the junction of the Rochers and Peace surpassed everything they met before, holding up the outfit while they rescued one horse after another from an icy bath, and losing a great deal of time as they attempted to skirt danger spots.

On February 14th they covered nine miles, having to shovel their way through almost every foot of it, and working from two o'clock in the morning until eleven at night; but the day after that, although they worked just as long hours, they covered only two miles.

"These drifts are getting deeper," the men grumbled, and Mickey had to agree with them. But he kept urging them on.

"We're almost out of food," he told them, "and the next hay cache is nearly twenty miles away. The horses won't be able to work if they don't get fed," he remarked.

"The horses," one of the men ejaculated bitterly. "All them horses have to do is eat and rest while we slave away like dogs," he spat his resentment out now. "Only when it's as cold as this, they don't make dogs work!" he rested on his shovel and gloomed for a while.

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"Better keep working," Mickey told him, "You'll freeze if you don't!"

The words were like a whip-lash and the man responded to them, but not as Mickey had expected. "Who's going to make me work?" he demanded, and Mickey turned away and moved up ahead to talk to one of the other teamsters. He had no wish to have a fight thrust upon him. He had other things to do; but within the hour he could not avoid one.

Coming up to Fred Conboy's team, he saw that the driver's face was like wax, and he called out to him urgently to turn his back to the wind. Then, "Keep arubbing at your face," he bade him.

"Sure, Mickey! Sure!" Fred said, turning his face from the bitterness of the wind, and slipping his hand out of his heavy mitt so that he could bring something of its warmth to his cheeks and nose.

Satisfied, Mickey went among the other teams, warning one against frostbite, and making another get off and walk in order to stir up his circulation.

When he came back to Fred, he saw with dismay that he was sitting on the sleigh, staring with glassy, unseeing eyes at the trail behind him.

"Come on! Get off and walk!" Mickey ordered peremptorily.

Fred sat, without moving.

"Oh, what's the matter with you?" Mickey demanded impatiently, jumping on the sleigh and shaking the big shoulders of the driver.

"Don't try to get funny with me," Fred muttered resentfully, half pushing Mickey away.

"You'd better get down and walk," Mickey ordered. "Otherwise you'll freeze as sure as can be!"

Fred refused to budge.

Suddenly Mickey swung into action. "We've got no time to argue," he said firmly, "You'll freeze while we're

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talking," and he slid to the ground, pulling Fred with him.

"Come on and walk!" he directed, but Fred might not have heard for all the indication he gave of hearing.

"Come on and walk!" Mickey's voice indicated that this was the last time he was calling off the order.

"Want to fight, eh?" Fred commented in a surly tone, lifting his hands slowly in what he must have believed to be a threatening manner.

Mickey grinned in embarrassment. "I can't very well fight you while you're dopey with cold," he said quietly. Then, sharply, "Get to walking!"

Fred's face darkened with rage. "You think I can't beat you," he said fiercely; "You think I can't beat you!" he was advancing towards Mickey now, endeavouring to bring his fist against the lean jaw, but the cold had obfuscated him, and when Mickey countered with an easy blow with his left, Fred went down like a log in the feathery snow.

"Come on, get up!" Mickey helped him to his feet, but Fred waved him away.

"You think you can lick me," he declared, "but I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of you because you can box." He staggered a little, and his words were like drunken ravings, "You can box in a ring, maybe; but in a free-for-all fight, I can lick two men like you."

He advanced on Mickey again, and with another easy blow Mickey flattened him.

He got up, muttering dire threats of immediate annihilation at Mickey; but went back in the snow as another blow knocked him off his feet.

Up and down he went, while Mickey kept a watchful eye on his opponent. The colour was coming back in his face! Good. Mickey hit him again.

The glassy look had left his eyes. Good. Mickey hit him once more.

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His breath was coming more evenly, and his speech came clear.

Mickey caught at Fred's arm. "Come on and we'll walk along now," he urged. "When we get into camp we can continue the fight if you want to."

Fred forced a chuckle; but Mickey noticed that his eyes glinted with resentment, the while he slapped him on the shoulder. "I don't feel like fighting now," he said earnestly. He put his hand to his face. "My face feels awful sore though." He fingered it gently.

"It'll be worse before it's better," Mickey told him. "You might as well have run a hot iron over it," he walked along quickly. "And the trouble is," he went on, "that once you've let the frost get at you enough to freeze, it seems to be easier for it to nip you again." He was rubbing his face as he spoke. Then he thrust his hand back in the mitt to get warm again, and without another word he was off to remind another teamster to "Keep a rubbing! Keep a rubbing! We don't want any more frozen faces around here."

But the look in Fred's eyes kept nagging him; for resentment never seems to die down in the North. It is like a forest fire that may be driven into the ground by the frost, but as soon as suitable weather comes its smouldering gives way to raging fury.

It was the eighteenth of February when they pulled up at the Buffalo Rangers Camp, and when they had eaten Mickey let his men get ready for sleep. "I'm going to see if I can borrow some dogs," he announced. "Then I'll hit the trail for Russell's stopping place and see if I can get some hay and oats for the horses. We can't let them starve."

The men fell quickly into heavy sleep, and they woke to find the strong smell of coffee fragrant in their nostrils, the sizzle of bacon pleasant in their ears, and a blazing fire waiting to warm them as Mickey called to them that breakfast was ready.

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"Haven't you been to bed at all?" they wanted to know, looking around at the horses munching contentedly at oats, while square bundles of hay lay on the light dog-sled waiting for unloading.

"No . . . I just got in a while back," Mickey said, feeding another stick of wood to the greedy fire. "If we get started right away, we ought to make Russell's to-day," he told them. "They've got a barn for the horses," he said meditatively.

"They've got a barn for the horses!" one of the men giped. "Everything is for the horses!"

Mickey grinned. "If they've got a barn for the horses," he explained, "they've got everything else in keeping."

"But won't you have to have some sleep?" one of the men enquired, his eyes on Mickey's lean face. "You must be awful tired."

Mickey shrugged. "I've got to keep going," he told them. "There's one thing about having people against you, like them people in McMurray. *They keep you going!*"

At four o'clock that afternoon they stumbled into Russell's. Mickey's face was grey-white and his eyes were heavy and lifeless after fifty-seven hours on the trail without rest.

The camp Russell had set up had been thrown together hastily, but the rude shacks promised more than shelter to the Ryan men. There would be four walls to protect them, and a roof over their heads; a stove to keep them warm; and a cot to sleep on, with a pillow for their heads, where they could lie and gaze lazily at the flickering shadows thrown by the fire, or look at the calendar on the wall and check off the days until they would be home again.

The next day they were off again, breaking trail through deep snow, and making only about twelve miles a day until they arrived at Fort Fitzgerald. It had taken them more than a month to make the three hundred miles from

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Fort McMurray, and as Mickey pulled into the little settlement, he felt new energy flooding through him, in spite of his weariness.

He was now at the beginning of *his* trail. Sixteen miles more and he would be at the end of his journey. Now he was sure that he was right and that from now on he would be able to use horses instead of dogs. Everything seemed very plain to him. He would build camps along the trail from McMurray to Fitzgerald, where his men and horses could rest at the end of each day's journey. He would cut overland trails wherever he could, so that when a bad winter like this one came, and the rivers froze extra-rough, they would be no hindrance to him. He would go on building and improving. . . .

His eyes looked ahead on the trail to Fort Smith, and he was full of gladness that the other trails had led to this. He passed the Halfway Point on the Portage and the dark ridge of jackpine joined with the ridge of poplar in waving welcome to him. He waved back in an ecstasy of power.

Then the moment was gone, and he was just a tired man, badly in need of rest.

And now the townsfolk were running on moccasined feet to meet them. The old-timers calling on God to be their witness that they wouldn't have believed the mail could ever have been brought in by horse and sleigh, while the younger folk thrilled with excitement at the sight of the heavily-blanketed horses that had made the hazardous trip through storm and blizzard, skirting airholes, rapids and rocks, to bring them gifts and cards and letters from Far Off Places.

To them Mickey Ryan was their Santa Claus, and they hailed him as such, with cries of delight and anxious enquiries as to what he had brought them.

One little girl put her mooseskin-mitted hand in his, and, looking up at him with earnest brown eyes, wanted to know had he brought her a doll. Mickey did not know.

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"Everything is in the bags with your names on. If you've been very good," he promised, "you'll have got the doll."

"I've been very good," she told him. Then thought for a moment. "All the time I've been good except some of the times when I've been bad." She meditated on that. "I haven't been *very* bad," she assured him, after some study.

"Then you'll get the doll," he promised; and was relieved when she came to him later, hugging an Eaton Beauty Doll with flaxen hair and china blue eyes.

"The first time we've ever had our Christmas mail before break-up," one woman cried. "Four letters from home!" she exulted, "Oh!" she threw her arms around Mickey's neck and kissed him heartily, "You've no idea how wonderful it is to get Christmas mail while there's still snow on the ground." She blushed a little now at her own exuberance. "I never could enjoy the Christmas parcels and mail the same with the mosquitoes and flies whining around," she excused herself.

"And now," Mickey said the next morning, "we'd better get packed up, and start on our way back."

The men grumbled a little, but admitted there wasn't much to do in Fort Smith anyway, so they might as well go home.

"A quarter of a million dollars worth of fur!" one of the teamsters said in awe when the heavy bales were lashed to the sleighs. "Imagine what the Company would have to say if we went through the river with this cargo!"

'The fur was delivered in safety to McMurray thirteen days later; but there was no rejoicing in that fort when the Ryan outfit pulled in. Instead, the Fort McMurray Board of Trade held a meeting in which the townsfolk might voice their anger at "This damn Yankee Ryan who is ruining the country. Standing in the way of Progress! And, above all, hindering the merchants of McMurray!"

"Look at me!" one man cried, "I'm stocked heavy with dog feed. I count on the dog teams coming in with

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furs from the North. Every dog driver that came in got \$125.00 and all his expenses paid. There would be fifty dog trains come in from Chipewyan. Fifty dog trains is two hundred and fifty dogs. And there would be fifty men to drive them. Fifty dog drivers," he orated, "would spend nearly all their money on drinking and extracts and things. Things that are cheaper here than in Chipewyan. Are we to lose all that business?" he gestured appealingly to the gathering in the room.

"I have a suggestion to make." A tall man rose to his feet now. "I suggest we complain about the cruelty to animals in taking the horses on these big trips," his eyes were shrewd and hard as he went on, "Get the Church to step in," he suggested. "And once the clergy put their foot down, we'll hear no more about horses instead of dogs."

The meeting adjourned then.

But when the inspection of the horses was made, no protest was possible against their use for hauling furs from Fort Smith, and the next morning Mickey commented to his brother that he couldn't see anything in McMurray for all the signs announcing "Dog Feed for Sale."

"If we had all got together," John Perry said bitterly, "and given that fellow three thousand dollars to have stayed home, we would have been better off . . ."

"He's ruining the town," was the general cry. "He's done all he could to keep the railroad from coming in here, and now he takes his horses and goes North and keeps the dog trains from coming in, and we can't get a train of *any kind*!"

At which Mickey retorted, "If I was living in a settlement, or a town, or whatever you want to call it, that was so shaky that a man could go out and ruin the whole town with six dollar-and-a-half cayuses, I wouldn't do any hollering about it. I'd keep my mouth shut for shame!"

It was the beginning of a new contract for Mickey, and for the next seven years he hauled the mail up to the North-West Territories during the winter months, using

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dogs only for the first and last haul of the season when the ice was too "touchy" for horses.

"Horses have come to stay!" the people declared; but as the occasional aeroplane winged its way over the Northern settlement, Mickey would watch it roaring across the blue sky, and he knew that the day of horse-delivery of mail would be a short one.

18

LAMSON-HIBBARD, with several million dollars behind them, brought prosperity to the North . . . for a while . . . a very short while.

Indians, half-breeds and Metis now became accustomed to the sight and feel of money, and the Lamson-Hibbard Company brought not only money, but many a new "fancy" to the market. High heeled shoes, low necked dresses, silk stockings, cosmetics and silk panties were all on sale at the new trading posts; and the Teamsters Ball and other social functions provided excuse for wearing satin and velvet gowns, sequin-trimmed preferred.

The quick change from moccasin to high heeled shoe, causing strained muscles and aching feet, spoiled much of the physical enjoyment in these gala occasions, but that was greatly offset by the knowledge that one was fashionably attired.

The men of the Hudson's Bay Company were forced to sit back and watch their trappers turn to the new company with their furs and for their supplies, while a stern Head Office in London insisted that there was a change coming.

The change came. Almost overnight the price of fur dropped, leaving Lamson-Hibbard Company with heavy stocks on hand.

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"It didn't drop. It just plummeted to the ground!" was how Mickey put it.

And now rumours ran like wildfire all over the North.

"The Lamson-Hibbard Company is pulling out of Canada!"

"And that'll leave Mickey Ryan in the lurch! I hear he's going to have to sell his horses and equipment."

In McMurray the rumour grew to: "The Ryan horses and equipment are going to be auctioned off to pay some of the debt they owe to Lamson-Hibbard Company!"

The McMurray Board of Trade was gleeful. "In any case, he's through," they said, "For the horses will eat their heads off, and they can't ship them out!"

Pat Ryan shook his head dolefully. "After all the work we've done on the road and everything, it seems too bad to lose everything now."

Mickey was not worried, however. His only concern at the moment was for the fear-shadow that lay back of Pat's eyes, a shadow he could not remove although he yearned to. For if he were to tell Pat his plans for the future, nothing could keep him from bragging around the town as the people of McMurray were openly gibing at the two brothers about their coming downfall. Mickey knew that Pat, nettled by remarks like: "Them that goes up like a rocket comes down like a stick!" would be stung into telling them how in the early spring when the freight had had to be hauled over seemingly bottomless mud, the Hudson's Bay Company had asked Mickey whether there was anything in his contract with the Lamson-Hibbard Company that would prevent him from hauling freight for their opposition.

When Mickey had assured them that there was not, promising that he would give both companies the same treatment, finishing with "And if anything comes up that the roads get too bad, a certain amount of teams and men will be earmarked for each company," the Hudson's Bay Company representative beamed his pleasure.

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"That solves the whole question," he declared. "If we get the same price and the same service, we will have no trouble."

He tried to turn the conversation to some other subject then, but Mickey fidgeted uneasily before saying uncertainly, "Well, it's like this." He kicked a toe against the ground, before blurting out, "If I'm going to have your contract for next year, I don't think it would be advisable for either of us to say anything to anyone about it—not even to our own employees." The District Manager looked his surprise, and Mickey continued, "As soon as wind of it gets around, there'll be petitions sent in to your London Office and to the Government and every other place under the sun, petitioning against giving me the contract." The District Manager tried to laugh the matter off. "Oh, you're imagining it, Mickey! You're imagining it!"

But Mickey was obstinate. "Just the same I'd appreciate it if you didn't say a word to anyone until the contract is signed."

And the District Manager, to humour him, gave his word. Thereby binding both himself and Mickey not to mention the matter to a soul.

"What'll we do?" Pat would say sometimes into the dark night; and Mickey would tell him that everything was going to be all right.

But Pat put it down as lip-talk, so it brought no easement for his anxiety.

Fall came and it was common gossip that the Lamson-Hibbard Company would have to withdraw from the Northern territory. So Mickey got on the train and went in to Edmonton.

It was like entering a new world, and he spent the first few days in the city getting himself adjusted to the noise, the hum of conversation, and the different "clip" at which people Outside lived.

As soon as he had settled himself into the jog-trot of

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the city, he called on Mr. Bryan. As Vice-President of Lamson-Hibbard Company he was full of hope that he could carry on without putting up any more money. "I've got a lot of ideas." He got up and moved to his office window and stood looking down at the slow-moving traffic on Jasper Avenue for a long minute before continuing, "I know where by liquidating here and moving stock there, I can carry on," he said with a shallow show of confidence.

There was a long pause when neither man could find anything to say.

Then : "You just go ahead and take the Hudson's Bay contract," he told Mickey. "You can look after them and us, both." Another pause, and his voice declared, "I'll be able to weather the storm."

He turned back from the window, and Mickey watched with troubled eyes as his friend let himself into the swivel chair on the other side of the desk from him ; then pick up the glass paperweight from the maculated green blotter and finger it nervously. It was an old-fashioned weight, with a solitary figure standing on a snow pile in the centre of a crystal globe. A flip of the hand ; the snow blizzarded and the man's figure was lost to view.

Mickey looked at it with startled eyes, then glanced sharply at his friend. Somehow he knew in that moment that Mr. Bryan would not weather the storm.

Mickey never liked to remember that glimpse of Mr. Bryan when he saw Defeat begin to take hold of him.

He liked less to remember the times when he saw him, his days in the Far North over, seated behind a desk, trying to wring a living out of a small business he had acquired with the limited amount of capital he had salvaged from his fur days.

"I need twelve thousand dollars," he said to Mickey on one of these occasions. "If I had that, I'd be all right," and Mickey handed him the cheque.

"I'll let you have it back," Mr. Bryan promised grate-

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fully ; but Mickey knew that he would never see his money again.

"He's lost his grip," he reported to Pat. Then : "It's kind of sad to see a fellow you've been out on the trail with, get slow on the trigger like he is."

"I wish there was something we could do," Pat moaned.

"It must be hard for him," Mickey mused aloud, "reaching his time of life with nothing to look forward to."

Pat laughed. "A person always looks forward to something," he declared. "When I was a kid growing up there in Muncie, I thought by the time I was thirty there'd be nothing to look forward to. But at thirty, I was still looking forward," he gave a low chuckle. "I guess a man always looks forward to something."

Mickey's face lifted then. "Yes," he agreed, "I guess a man always looks forward to Something !"

19

THE Lamson-Hibbard Company was gone.

But now the Imperial Oil Company planned an invasion of the North in search of oil, promising to take in with them, during their first season, seven hundred and fifty tons of machinery and supplies ; all of which would have to pass through the "Bottleneck of the North," the Smith Portage.

"If we can only get our fair share of that freight to haul, we'll be all right," Mickey said, and went to Edmonton to see about getting it.

This freight was to be handled through the Hudson's Bay Company and Mickey talked himself into the contract ; getting it signed, sealed and in his pocket before he sent a telegram to his brother to "get Ramsey and the men to fix the road."

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Within the hour a reply came back from Pat advising that if the contract had not been signed, Mickey should attend to it right away, as already petitions were being signed in McMurray, protesting against a contract being given to "a virtual foreigner like Mickey Ryan, who already held a franchise on two hundred miles of railway track, being the only man in the British Empire to hold dominion over an empire of railway," and begging that no further power be given to a man who was well on his way to being the uncrowned king of the North.

Hard on the heels of the telegram came a telephone call from the District Manager of the Hudson's Bay Company asking Mickey to come over to his office.

He went, and was shown a sheaf of telegrams protesting against the contract being given to a foreigner like Mickey Ryan, and pouring out vitriolic words against him that burnt up from the yellow paper at him as he read.

"Maybe," the District Manager suggested, mildly, "it would be better if you were to sublet some of the hauling to a few of the teamsters who have freighted for our company for years."

Mickey nodded. "I had that all figured out a long time ago," he said quietly. "I need some horses and equipment," he went on. "As soon as I get to McMurray, if any of them are still speaking to me when I get there, I'll ask them what they consider their outfits are worth. If their price is at all reasonable, I'll buy them out and give them a job working for me. But if they don't want to do that, I will let them haul freight at the same price that we are getting. Provided," Mickey got to his feet now as he laid down his proviso, "they will haul at that price good weather or bad." He took a handful of coins from his pocket and clicked them between his hands. "But if they are going to be just fair-weather birds and come out only when all the conditions are perfect—then when the road gets bad, stand by and leave it to the men who are

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under contract and have to work, why it won't fit very good."

He sat down now.

The District Manager voiced his approval, then suggested that he should send a telegram to McMurray outlining this plan.

Mickey laughed, and went on to predict the answer the District Manager might expect from such a communication. "They'll tell you they'll shoot the horses and starve to death before they'll haul for those blankety-blank so-and-so's."

The wire came back much as Mickey had expected, and he went back to McMurray to find Pat full of excitement and foreboding, for the Ryan teamsters had been fighting with the other drivers, and the Fort was full of black eyes and black looks, and Mickey did not have to be told that a boycott was in the air. He knew it.

"Not one of these fellows will ever work for you," Pat said with concern.

But he was wrong. Within a day or two Percy Rounds sneaked away from the pack and found Mickey, to say, "Well, I sure got caught in the clinches, stuck my neck out at the right time." Percy shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I just came back on the last train before you came in from Lac la Biche, where I had bought myself a team and harness and a set of sleighs, thinking that I could do a little gypo freighting. It cost me five hundred dollars," he grieved. "That's just what it cost me to get in on this fun."

Mickey clucked sympathetically. Percy was the somewhat irresponsible son of a man who had worked for the Government, and for whom all the Northerners had a deep affection. He had tried to set his son up in the freight business some years before, but Percy had "drunk the horses up" and returned to McMurray penniless, to pick up whatever he could in the way of odd jobs.

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Mickey was glad to buy the outfit and hire Percy to haul for him ; but when the deal was closed and he said off-handedly, "Bring the team up and put it in my barn," Percy was flooded with embarrassment.

"Say, Mickey," he said, his eyes shifting from one object to another, unable to find anything to focus themselves on, "Would you mind coming with me to get the team?" he implored.

Mickey went with him, but said nothing until they had passed through the settlement together, and were unhitching the horses in front of the Ryan barn, when he pressed Percy to tell him why he had wanted company on such a short trip.

"I was sure, certain, that when I came past the 'hatchery' where they hatch up all the dirt against you, that some of them would jump on me if I was alone," he gulped. "You see we all promised to stay together until the roads got so bad, or you got up against it for help, and you had to come to us. Then we were going to hold you up and gouge you enough to break you," he gulped again. "I promised to stand by them ; and after me selling out to you right away, they would all have been a-hollering, and they might have mobbed me."

Mickey gave his back an encouraging slap, and went on to tell him that with the Imperial Oil Company coming in with so much freight, there would be enough work for everyone to do ; pointing out that the heavy machinery and equipment that was being brought into the country demanded that the freighting methods be improved, and that the day of the man with one team had passed.

Percy admitted that this might be true for this one year ; but hinted that the next year would likely see a drop-off in the amount of freight to be hauled. "Not so long ago," he reminded Mickey, "four hundred tons of freight was the limit to cross the Portage in a season, and that's its normal, I guess."

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"I'm counting on it going ahead," Mickey declared, "and I'd just as soon go broke gambling on the country opening up, as be broke because I was afraid to take a chance."

The next week brought most of the small team owners to Mickey with an offer to sell out ; but the larger ones held to their resolution not to deal with him.

"They'll all be working for me before the year is out," Mickey would say jokingly when someone brought word of what they were saying around the settlement, "They'll all be working for me," trying to stem off any further conversation.

In a short time they implemented their resolution not to sell out to him by clubbing together and buying a wood-sawing machine. With their teams to haul the wood and the machine to saw it into stove lengths, they soon built up a better livelihood for themselves than they had ever had with the freighting business. As they worked, their animosity against Mickey wore off, and soon they were seeking a contract from him to haul in wood and saw it for the Ryan camp.

"I wouldn't trust them to do it, Mickey," Percy Rounds said anxiously, "I wouldn't trust them."

"I need the wood," was all Mickey said, and the men went to work.

If Percy did not trust the other men, they did not trust him. Repeatedly they came to Mickey advising him against his teamster, reviving old stories of when Percy had put in time at the local jail. Telling how he had spent the summer doing chores for the police, hilling potatoes and sawing what wood they would need for the coming winter.

On the last morning of his sentence he asked for the privilege of hilling up the potatoes once more. "They won't need any more hilling," he said quietly, that evening ; and the next morning he was free.

When he had gone the police looked out at their garden, and when they saw the wilted patch of potatoes they thought

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the frost had nipped them and prepared to face a potato-less winter. But when they began to talk around the settlement about the heavy frost of the night before, they were laughed at openly ; and it soon became evident that theirs was the only potato patch that had been touched by "frost."

Upon inspection, it proved that Percy had hilled the potatoes up, then cut each potato plant off, slightly below the ground level, with a well-sharpened hoe.

The people of the settlement "Ha ha'd," and the police made their own threats of what they would do to Percy if they ever caught him again.

They had begun to see the humour in the episode when fresh cause for grievance showed itself. Bringing in an armful of wood from the huge pile cut and stacked by Percy during the time of his detention, they found that every piece of wood had been cut an inch or two longer than they had ordered, so that every time they put a fresh piece of wood in the stove, the door refused to close and the police would mutter angry imprecations against their former prisoner for, as they said, "If there is anything more cussed than a piece of firewood just too long for your stove, we've never met it."

"Why don't you saw the end off?" Percy demanded wide-eyed, when they complained to him. "Only an inch or two off every piece," he told them. "That wouldn't take much sawing."

"It'd be easier to saw a whole new wood pile than to take an inch off every piece of wood you sawed," they snapped.

Percy came to Mickey himself with the story. "It's like this," he said with a small-boy scowl, "If one of them old mossbacks gets drunk, the police see that they get home safe. But if it's me that gets drunk, they make me saw wood and hoe potatoes. And I get mighty tired of it, let me tell you."

Mickey nodded. And when people told him about Percy he laughed. "Every time a policeman wants a trip Outside to the Calgary Stampede or something, he looks around for some sin to hang on Percy," he gibed,

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“and what Percy does when he’s in jail is between him and the police. The only thing I’m interested in, is how he works for me!”

20

WHEN the Ryan Brothers brought in a touring car in which to transport passengers across the Portage, they expected that such business would be confined to Outsiders who were coming in or returning to the south. But, to their surprise, the people of Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald turned to it as one of their greatest pleasures, so that before the summer was half over Mickey felt justified in investing in a closed sedan to be used as a taxi between the two towns. Immediately the popularity of the touring car waned, for when the townsfolk could ride in a covered carriage, they scorned anything else.

By 1925 Mickey had four passenger cars running across the Portage, with all of them kept busy, and that summer an eighteen-passenger bus was brought in so that people travelling to the Arctic could be transported on schedule between the connecting boats.

With the coming of the bus, a dance in Fort Smith or Fort Fitzgerald became a joint affair, and some prosperous trapper or other was sure to hire the Ryan bus and take his friends across the Portage to every party.

The popularity of the bus made the purchase of another one imperative; and soon two buses were running back and forth; while the Ford cars, with racks built on them, were relegated to hauling freight, being replaced by cars of a heavier make, which meant greater comfort for passengers as they made the sixteen mile trip.

The Portage was on its way towards becoming a highway.

* * * *

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In 1924 the meadows where they had cut their hay and wintered their horses was flooded, and Mickey was driven to finding other meadow-land.

"We've got to make sure we're not going to be flooded out again," Mickey said. Then, presently, he was admitting that he had his eye on a piece of land that lay half-way between Fort Chipewyan and Fort Fitzgerald, and at Pat's nod of approval, he hurried on to say, "But I've never looked it over to see whether it had ever been flooded."

Pat was quick to urge that they protect themselves by checking carefully on drift sticks or any sign of previous flooding, warning that once a piece of land was invaded by flood it was never safe again.

Mickey was of the same mind. "For this time I think we'll have to count on starting a real ranch," he declared. "Put up some buildings and have somebody to take care of the horses. Feed a few cattle so we can have fresh beef to eat."

Astonished wonder spread over Pat's face as he inquired whether Mickey was figuring on trying to raise cattle this far North.

A quick "No" was the answer. To be followed by: "But I thought if we were to bring in a few thin cattle and feed them up fit for killing, it'd break the monotony in the food."

Pat let his mouth water for a moment at the thought of roast beef to eat, before saying wistfully that he hoped they'd soon be able to eat a good steak.

"I haven't looked the ground over yet," Mickey warned, "So hobble your lip until I've made sure about the flooding."

Mickey went all over the land, searching with keen eyes for any sign of drift sticks that would have been carried there had it ever been visited by floods from the river; but he found none.

Then he crossed to the Buffalo Park which lay on the other side of the river to take the levels of the bank there.

He came back satisfied. "It's much lower on the

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other side," he told Pat. Then announced his decision to go ahead with his plans for a ranch, for if the river were to jam up and start to flood, it would go over the other side and drown all the buffalo in the Park before it ever visited the Ryans.

The next summer the ranch was the talk of the North.

"He's building a frame house out there ; and he's put down several hundred acres of Timothy Clover and Brome Grass ; and brought in all the latest hay-making machinery. Imagine putting all that stuff up there with no way of getting in or out, except by boat !"

They waited now for the worst to happen, and when the word came out that all the Timothy Hay and Clover had been frost-killed, their tongues clacked in jubilation.

But when Mickey succeeded in getting the grass to establish itself and rumours spread that he was getting two and a half to three tons of hay to the acre, they began to change their tune.

Now it was, "That Mickey Ryan, he goes in and takes over the best piece of land in the country. The only piece of soil of any size in this part of the world, and sets himself up with a two-story house and a garden with vegetables, and horses. Then ships in cattle and after he's fattened them, feeds all the beef to his own hired men ! What's the sense in feeding beef to hired men, when the local citizens are glad to get salted birds ?" they snorted !

Mickey did not tell them what a luxury the beef was ; for by the time he bought the cattle on the Edmonton market, and brought them in over five hundred miles by rail and barge, then fed them at the ranch until they were ready for killing, the beef was worth twice what it would fetch on a city market.

Soon pressure was brought to bear on him to make some of the beef available for the people of both Smith and Fitzgerald. "Our tongues are hanging out half the time for a bit of beef," they said, and begged him to sell to them.

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"But it'll cost far more than it would cost if you had any kind of transportation to bring it in," Mickey declared, going on to tell them that the cattle had to be fed ten months out of the twelve ; for while in the Spring there might be eighteen inches to two feet of grass growing, about six or eight inches down the ground would still be frozen and the topsoil would remain wet and mossy ; so that it was impossible to turn the cattle out to feed, as they would quickly turn his hundred acres of meadow into a mucky field.

"You've got to wait for the ground to thaw out a bit," Mickey would go on. "Then by that time, you have to keep the cattle in the barn to protect them from the bulldog flies and mosquitoes, which leaves only a little while in the Fall when they can graze out."

Mickey would meditate then on the peculiarities of a country where cattle were kept out of the barn in the winter and put, instead, in big feeding corrals erected in the shelter of the timber and two miles from water, so that the animals had the long walk back to their feed to warm them up after drinking greedily of the cold water.

"We learned right at the start," Mickey said, "that when it got around sixty to sixty-five below zero or during storm weather, and you got to feeling sorry for the cattle and put them into the barns, with the big coat of hair they had on they would get hot and damp ; and then when they were put out they would suffer for the rest of the winter and lose weight."

"But no matter what it costs, we want to buy beef from you," they said with insistence ; and soon Mickey had his beef going over the counters at Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald ; and while some people grumbled that it cost too much, they bought it.

The men might be pleased with the steaks that were added to the menus ; but to the women, who were trying to keep house and provide tasty meals on the limited supplies in their larders, the beef was a God-send.

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Caribou meat which they had in plenty, was bought by them from the Indians, who kept the tender young meat for themselves and peddled off their old bull meat. Tasteless at best, they found it so tough that it had to be run through the food chopper in order to make mastication possible, which meant that no matter what way it was served, it never looked like a company dish.

"Now," the women chorused, "when we have visitors we can fix up a meal as good as anyone."

Mickey was familiar with the chores of housekeeping in the North, for he and Pat had their own difficulties. Making bread one day a week and setting it, hot out of the oven, on the back porch to freeze. A dozen pies would be frozen, too ; then taken in and set in the oven to thaw out and warm as they were needed.

Supplies came in on the last boat in September and had to be spread over until the first boat came in the Spring. Eggs, thirty dozen to the crate, had to be turned over regularly so that the yolks would not stick to the shells. Oranges, lemons, grapefruit and apples had to be picked over every day—a spotty apple removed and a hard lemon used until, long before the coming of the Spring, there would be none left.

Fort Smith, in spite of its plentiful water supply, provided no fish for its inhabitants.

"The Smith fish are soft and mushy, fit only for dog feed." The people were bitter. "We can't swim in the river because the current is so swift ; and we can't eat the fish out of it," they'd complain. "All it does is bring the gulls here ; and the noise of them is enough to drive one crazy !"

Mickey was glad to know that indirectly his ranch was making it easier for the women to "settle in" in the North ; and his own pride in the ranch was growing with every year. Fences were put up, gardens were sown with tomatoes, potatoes, cabbages and beets. Gladioli, sweet peas and stocks bloomed in profusion, encouraged by the long summer

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days into a growth that was astonishing to everyone who climbed up the river bank from the boat that called to discharge livestock or supplies at the Ryan Ranch.

Charlie Helker lived at the ranch house the year round, and would have stayed alone all winter, but Mickey insisted that he have someone for company, otherwise he might become "bushed."

"I don't know anyone I'd want to have," he'd say. But Mickey would insist on his choosing his own companion for the long winter ahead, for he knew that by the spring the two men would hate each other and the younger man would meet the first boat that arrived with tales of how Charlie had a schedule drawn up, with a timetable that was immovable.

"If his schedule says to open the barn doors at six o'clock, and he gets through doin' what he's been doin' and is ready to open them at five minutes to, he goes in the house and sits down waitin' for it to be six sharp before he'll touch the doors. The guy's nuts!"

When the ranch had been going about four years, Charlie chose Frank Kilrow as his helper and companion for the winter; and when spring came, both men hurried to Mickey. Charlie Helker saying, "Frank's no good for anything. Everything he does, I have to tell him to." While Frank complained, "Nothing I ever do pleases him." He cranked his right arm a time or two before adding, in a lowered voice, "I don't think anything *could* please him, whatever!"

But that fall when Mickey asked Charlie who he had picked to stay with him for the winter, the answer came quickly that Frank Kilrow would be as good as anyone.

"I thought you didn't like him," Mickey said in some surprise and a little embarrassment.

Charlie admitted his dislike of the little man; but added, "I guess he's as good as anyone."

"But have you spoken to him?" Mickey put the question forward timidly.

Charlie shook his head and Mickey went on to suggest

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that it was quite likely that Frank might want to winter at one of the Forts, especially as he had been out at the ranch for well over a year. "You'd better speak to him," Mickey urged. Then kept out of the way while the two men had their conference, for he had no wish to witness Charlie's discomfiture when Frank refused to stay on.

In a little while Frank came strolling up to Mickey. "Guess what?" he said, his eyes twinkling under his iron-grey hair. Then, cranking his arm he went on to announce, "Helker's asked me to stay over for the winter."

Mickey grinned as if in surprise, and inquired guardedly what answer he had given to the invitation.

The arm cranked, the store-bought teeth clacked. "I figure to stay on," was all he said.

Mickey expressed his bewilderment at this decision, and Frank bridled a little. "He's never asked anyone to stay over for a second winter before," he paused. Then, with pride, "He must have liked me, or he wouldn't have asked me to stay on."

Mickey left him there; but before the winter was out a couple of trappers came in to him, urging him to get out to the ranch with all possible speed for the two men were on the point of killing each other.

Mickey hitched up a team of dogs and started out; but before he came to the ranch he met Frank, a heavy pack on his back, tramping his way out to Fort Fitzgerald.

Calling the dogs to a halt, Mickey enquired how things were.

"Fine! Fine! All the stock is a livin' yet," Frank told him, laying down the pack. "But," he declared, "if I'd a stayed there with that old Charlie Helker another day I'd likely a murdered him."

Mickey asked bluntly what had happened.

Frank paused for a while, trying to sort out his reasons for leaving. Then, cranking himself up with his arm, forced the words out of him. "I've put up with that fussy

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old so-and-so makin' out a timetable and forcin' me to live up to it ; and I've accommodated myself to wipin' my boots off afore I set foot in the house every time ; and I endured him areadin' out loud to me out of the durndest books and stuff ; but when it come to him tellin' me where I could P a hole in the snow, why then I up and quit ! ”

Mickey showed no surprise ; for he had known for a long time that Charlie Helker did not permit his hired men to walk a hundred steps from the door in any direction. He had set up a couple of poles at a spot that marked the required distance from the house, a spot thereafter referred to as “ the lavatory ” ; and Mickey, knowing Charlie, would not have been surprised if he had not only insisted that it be used, but that it be used on a schedule.

21

SMOKE started to roll in from the North soon after that. The men working on the road sniffed and complained that they couldn't see a thing through the blue haze ; but most of them had never been close to a forest fire of any size and it held little fear for them. However, as the smoke became more dense and Mickey set them out to discing the fireguards around the Halfway, they began to feel some concern.

“ It's started coming down the Portage,” Bill Russell, one of the teamsters, reported as he drove in from Fort Fitzgerald with a truckload of gasoline. “ They phoned through from Smith to say it wasn't safe to try to get through to there at all,” he announced.

Mickey got in one of the cars and drove out to where the fire fighters were busy pumping water up with a small Evinrude engine, with which to quench the flames that

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were marching southward, leaving a blackened terrain to mark their passing.

He exchanged the time of day with Inspector Martin, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who was standing by, watching with admiration as the men worked furiously, in spite of their weariness, in a desperate effort to get the flames under control.

"Looks pretty bad," Mickey commented anxiously.

Inspector Martin nodded.

"I hope they get it checked soon," Mickey said, with a despairing look at the little Evinrude engine that was working at top speed pumping water from a canvas tank and hosing it on to the vicious orange flames that seemed determined not to let themselves be quenched.

"I've got the men out with the teams discing the fireguards," Mickey offered a little later ; but in his heart he knew that a fire like this would jump the fireguard as easily as a steeplechaser would take a small brush-jump.

A light wind came up then, driving from the direction of the Halfway, and Mickey grinned. "No need to worry now," he told Inspector Martin. "This breeze'll drive it back."

Inspector Martin said nothing. This fire looked bad to him, viewed from any angle. The timber was tinder-dry, and unless the wind brought rain with it, he felt no cause for hope.

Mickey went back to the Halfway then. His family was there, waiting to move out at a moment's notice ; and he wanted to bring them the good news that the danger was over.

This done, he came back to where the fire brigade was at work, only to find the engine had been moved closer to the Halfway.

"The fire's burning right into the wind !" he marvelled aloud. Then, "We've got to do something !" he exclaimed, punching his left palm with his right fist. Then, "That little Evinrude fire pump," he said contemptuously, "why

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I could stand there and spit against the fire and do as much good as it," he told them.

The blaze was only two and a half miles from the Halfway now, and Mickey was sick with fear. Unless a heavy rain came, there was no hope now for the dry frame buildings above the Rapids. The smoke was too dense now to see whether there was any sign of a cloud in the sky ; but the air had no promise of dampness in it.

Mickey moved over to where one of his teamsters was standing, swatting at mosquitoes and cursing between every slap. "The Indians used to start backfires to fight forest fires with," Mickey said to him, scratching his head as he spoke.

"How did they do it?" the teamster wanted to know.

Mickey explained the system of starting a blaze at the edge of a road or river, where it had to eat back to meet the forest fire, finishing with "And when the two fires meet they go out. Puff, like that!"

The teamster declared his unbelief that anything of the kind could happen.

"With the way the wind is blowing now, away from the Halfway, the fire'd be sure to run right up to this one," Mickey said, consideringly.

Immediately the word spread around the group of townsfolk, who had come out from Fitzgerald to watch the conflagration, that Mickey Ryan was talking about setting another fire. "We're here to put this blaze out," one of the older men declared, "not to start a new one."

Mickey tried to explain the principle of back-firing ; but the other man shook a fist in his face. "You start a fire, and you'll spend two years in the penitentiary," he warned.

"If I lose everything I've got," Mickey retorted, "I might as well be a guest of the Government for a while."

Now Inspector Martin moved over. "What's going on here?" he wanted to know.

"We've got a good chance to backfire the blaze at the road from the Mountain Highway," Mickey told him.

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Inspector Martin's face lit for a moment. "With the way the wind is blowing," he figured, "you might be right." Then his face clouded. Anxiety tracking itself into every line. In a moment he was sticking his forefinger into his mouth and moistening it, before holding it up in the air in that simplest of all tests for wind-direction. Immediately a look of astonishment swept all other feeling before it. He nudged Mickey. "The wind's turned!" His voice was unbelieving.

Mickey licked his own finger and held it up for a moment to make the wind-test; and, although he expected to feel the touch of the draft on the Halfway side, the sensitized indicator told him that the wind had indeed swung around and was now in good position to drive the fire across the Ryan buildings.

"If only I'd lit the backfire a few minutes ago," he moaned.

Again an authoritative voice warned him against any such act. But Inspector Martin cut it off with, "If the Ryan luck holds anything like it usually does," he said soothingly, "the backfire'll work." And Mickey hurried off to the place where the ridge of discing cut the moss and brush. He halted at its edge, then moved along it touching a match here and there to the dust-dry moss as he walked along, fanning the small blaze with his hat to encourage it on its way north, towards the forest fire that was roaring its way southward.

The crowd stood breathless, waiting for the new fires to flare up into the jackpine, then turn with the wind and head towards the Halfway, jumping the narrow disced road without hesitation, to continue their march of devastation as long as there was timber to feed them.

But the little flames were in such a hurry to get to the big fire that they could not stop to feast upon the trees around them, and they ran along the ground, an army of forked tongues, until they met their opponent.

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Immediately, it was as if each fire had devoured the other at one gulp, and there wasn't a blaze left.

A sigh of relief went up from the crowd ; and they gathered around Mickey now to pat him on the back and offer congratulations on the good work he had done.

Inspector Martin grinned happily. "The Ryan luck held," he told Mickey. "Look," he pointed at the jack-pine that stood, stately and green above the scorched moss, "Not one of your precious trees touched," he marvelled. "It's like a miracle."

22

"THIS is an awful late spring," Pat commented, an eye on the calendar. "The end of May, and not a boat over Lake Athabasca yet. Ought to have been here two weeks ago," he fretted.

Mickey was worried, too. For 1929 had promised to be the biggest year the North had known, with the Hudson's Bay Company putting up new posts, the Missions building up their missions, and the Government putting in wireless stations, so that the quantity of freight to be hauled across the Portage during the summer would strain every nerve to the utmost.

During the winter Mickey had gone the seventeen hundred miles to Winnipeg where he bought a couple of bright red trucks and a tractor that could be used in maintaining the road and hauling the heavier freight, making arrangements to have them shipped by rail to the end of steel, then transferred to the boat at Waterways and brought in to Fitzgerald ; stopping at Edmonton on his way home to hire the drivers to come in with them.

"Every day lost now," Pat complained, "means that

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much more of a rush when things open up, for the boats'll be anxious to get started out of Fort Smith."

"Yeah, we'll have to work day and night to keep things rolling."

Both men had in mind the, at best, too short period of open water when the boats had to deliver the supplies upon which the people to the North were so dependent ; and it was hard to stand by helplessly and watch the navigation season being whittled down before it got a chance to start.

May withered and June blossomed before the first boat arrived, bringing with it the trucks and tractor. With their help the freight was carried across the Portage in record time and the officials of the Hudson's Bay Company were moved to compliment Mickey. "This Smith-Fitzgerald Portage, instead of being the weakest link in the transportation line, is now the strongest," they commented with satisfaction, as they watched their freight move easily towards its destination.

They spoke too soon. For on the twelfth of June a cloudburst put a stop to all transportation across the Portage. Long stretches were under water, with most of the rest threatened with inundation.

"It's got to let up soon," everyone said ; but the bad weather continued ; occasionally changing into snow or sleet, then back to rain again, until the road was impassable even with horses.

"No one knows how long it may be before we'll be able to take a truck across there," Mickey chafed, as the rain continued with no promise of let-up.

"We'll have to use horses if we're to get that freight across," he declared at last.

"But we'd need at least twenty more teams of horses to get rid of the freight we've got to move," Pat protested. "That'd mean twenty more teamsters, too. Where'd we get them?" he dismissed the subject as he sought solace in a cigar.

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"We're going to have to have them if we're to get the freight moved," Mickey was firm.

"Everyone knows up here that if you get a bad summer you can't get the stuff across the Portage," Pat told him.

"That was before our time. Now it's got so we've been moving whatever came in," Mickey was punching his left palm with his right fist as he talked. "The only way to get the people outside to do anything with this country," he declared, "is to convince them that the freight will be transported no matter what the weather is like."

"With the kind of climate we have up here, that's easier said than done," Pat eyed the window, greyed with rain; then turned to his brother and noticed that his eyes were as grey. "You're taking this hard," he said sympathetically, "But you can't do anything when it comes to rain," he soothed.

"When I take on a job, I like to get it done," Mickey said; "and when I get balked every time I try to do something, it irks me something terrible."

"You always were like that," Pat remembered. "I'll never forget the time you grabbed an old snake out at Grandfather Ross' farm and hauled it down to the river to drown it. You hollered something awful when Uncle Bake took it from you and killed it," he grinned. "You never would believe Uncle Bake that it wouldn't drown!"

All that night Mickey tossed and turned in his bed, while the rain beat on the roof. The noise of the water running into the rainbarrel could be a pleasant sound after a spell of dry weather; but this night, with the barrels overflowing, it was worse than a dripping tap.

He dropped off to sleep, and when he woke the sun was streaming through the windows, for the first time in two weeks, nearly blinding him. "It's cleared!" he said, rubbing his eyes and taking another look. "It's cleared!"

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He moved to the window and looked out at the drenched earth. The perfume of wild roses was sweet on the air. A small brown bird lit on a branch of a low-growing shrub ; cocked an eye at Mickey and with a frightened "tweet" flew off to perch on another tree where she felt safer. He stood motionless, watching her ; and she, overcome by curiosity, flew right back.

Mickey observed her with interest. "The wet ground doesn't bother her much," he said, then began to pull his clothes on. "What I wouldn't give for a pair of wings right now," he declared ; then his right fist came pounding into his left palm.

"I've got an idea !" he was jubilant. "I can get a plane at Fitzgerald. I'll get it to take me into Edmonton and buy up a few horses and hire some teamsters and——"

"But Mick," Pat protested, "You've never been up in an aeroplane. I don't trust them much." His voice was pregnant with memories of planes coming down with broken propellers ; of charred remains of plane, pilot and passengers when fire had burnt the silver wings ; and of forced landings that had meant lying with fractured limbs waiting for help to come . . . help that did not always come.

"I'll never get my first aeroplane ride any younger," Mickey declared. Then, slowly, "It's the only way I can see for it."

"You're not scared ?" Pat asked him.

"I'm not scared," Mickey assured him ; but when he said good-bye to his family he lingered over the parting. Suppose this were the last time he should ever see them ? John, his first-born. He ran his fingers through the dark curls, then kissed him. "Bye, son," he said, "Bye !" Peggy was clinging to one leg, passionately declaring that she would not let him go. He kissed his wife again, ran a finger along the curve of the baby's chin, and left the house. Pat had a team waiting, and before Mickey got to it

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he turned to look back at the house. But his blurred eyes could see nothing of its outlines, nor could he see the little group standing on the doorstep, waving fondly ; but he could hear their voices urging him to hurry home.

“Hurry home !”

Suppose he couldn't come home ? A sudden storm, a forced landing . . . anything might happen.

Pat was at his elbow. “You don't have to go, you know,” he reminded him.

“No ! No !” Mickey came to with a start. “I've got to go. It's the only way to carry out my part of the contract.”

When he arrived at Fitzgerald there was no plane there. “It should have been here a couple of days ago,” they told him, “but it never showed up.”

The boat was ready to leave, however, and soon he was deciding to go aboard and travel with it until the plane should come along and pick him up. Leaving instructions for the pilot to that effect, he departed, keeping his club-bag packed so that he would be ready to disembark at a moment's notice. He could not rest, though ; and his eyes ached from watching the cloudless blue sky as mile after mile was passed without a hint of sight or sound of the expected plane.

A hundred miles of watching before Harry Godsell, who was leaving the North for ever, called in excitement, “Here's your plane, Mickey !”

Mickey had already seen it, and he ran to get his club-bag ; then waited silently as the small plane circled around the steamboat before landing on the river, like a huge gull coming to rest.

In a few seconds the transfer was made, and Mickey was telling of his rush to get to Edmonton in order to buy the horses he needed for the Portage.

Punch Dickens, the pilot, looked grave as he pointed out that it would have to be a charter trip as he did not

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have a load beyond McMurray. After some consultation it was agreed that they would fly in to McMurray and see whether there might not be some other passengers going in from there.

When they reached McMurray Mickey tried to find a freight train, a speeder or any kind of vehicle that would take him on his way to the city, for he was not inclined towards paying the five hundred dollars it would cost him to get to Edmonton by plane. But there was nothing available.

Within the hour he was flying out of the little settlement and he settled down to enjoying the trip. The plane was a magic carpet taking him over House River and the Pelican ; across the La Biche River, and above the farms that formed a green checkerboard in the northern sunlight ; then dipping down on the Lake outside Edmonton City which was the resting place for the aeroplanes from the North between trips.

He came home, bringing horses and teamsters ready to start the work of hauling along the tortuous trail.

He came home, bringing a teddy-bear, a doll and a rattle.

He came home, bringing himself. A new self that could hear music in the swishing of a broom, in the creaking of the springs as the children turned over in their cribs, and in the scraping of a spoon against a shiny plate. He could hear their music now ; for he had entered a place where there was only the roar of a mighty engine in a great space ; and it had opened his ears to the music of little things.

At the end of the season Mickey could compliment himself that he had hauled every pound of freight he had contracted to portage ; but as Pat said, "Several years profit got 'et up this year. It'll take a long time to get back on our feet again !"

"Oh, nonsense !" Mickey declared, "I've got more work in sight the next year than I thought we'd ever get !"

23

IN 1929 arrangements were made to fly the mail in to Fort Smith, and Mickey settled down to a lazy winter. It was the first season without work since January, 1922, when he had started taking the mail up with horses to the North West Territories, and he made his mind up to enjoy it.

He took a trip up to Chipewyan in the Fall and went out goose hunting with Colin Fraser, taking two Indian boys along with them to do the "calling."

Hiding themselves in a clump of willows on a point on the lake, Colin and Mickey settled themselves down in comfort before ordering the two boys off to hide themselves a few yards away from them, but in opposite directions.

Before long a flock of geese could be seen coming from the North, spread out in the familiar "V" shape, and flying high so that they need have no fear of shot from the ground below.

Immediately the boys set up a honking that fell on Mickey's ears with a genuine ring. But would it fool the geese, he wondered. He watched them. For a moment they continued on their way; then, after hurried consultation among themselves, they turned and came back, circling low as they peered around in search of the birds that were calling to them.

Colin Fraser lifted his shot gun to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. Those that could still fly, flew off in alarm, but the boys continued to call to them and they responded to the cries of distress, only to be peppered again by Colin's shot gun, which blasted at them as long as they kept returning.

"It's wonderful the way those boys can call," Mickey said admiringly, when they were ready to gather up the birds; and Colin invited him back for a fox hunt.

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As soon as it was cold enough so the meat would freeze quickly, preserving the fresh flavour, Mickey made a trip out to Star Lake, sixty-five miles from Fitzgerald, with some Indians on a caribou hunt.

When they reached their destination the Indian Chief, who was escorting the party, looked around for a good point on which to camp, selecting one which gave them a good view of the lake.

As soon as this was done he had the tom-tom started. First one member of the group sang the refrain which is the prelude to the music that accompanies every gambling session where Indians are gathered :

Kis-pin Kih-sak-i-hin See-mac Kwis-co-in

(If you love me, hurry up and sleep with me right away), and then, holding the tune, but omitting the words, they took turns crying "Hiay, Heeah !" as they waited for the caribou to come.

Mickey joined them in the inevitable poker game, with which Indians of that part always while the time away as they wait for the caribou to come, the Indian chief acting as banker, as they played for moccasins, dog whips, blankets or other equipment which could be thrown into the game.

It was two days before the dogs began to whine, announcing the coming of the caribou. Immediately the game was thrown over, everything in it being returned to its owner, and hitching up the dogs they set out to meet the coming herd, which was no more than a speck in the distance.

"They'll change their course and come towards us," the Chief told Mickey now. "They'll think we're more caribou."

Mickey watched with keen eyes, but the far-sighted Indians could tell him what was happening long before he could discern it for himself.

"They're coming towards us now," they exulted, and soon they were halting the dogs and tying them into position for the caribou hunt. This, Mickey learnt, was accomplished

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by tying the headline on the lead dog to his sleigh, so that if he moved he would go around in a circle.

The dogs tied so that they could not run among the caribou and scatter them, the men took their rifles and started picking out the best of the herd. Thirty to forty apiece they got before the herd could get away from them, and then they settled down to skinning and quartering the animals they had shot.

"A lot of the skins are no good to do anything with," the Chief grieved. "Too full of warbles," he grumbled. He was removing the heart, tongue and liver from a fair-sized carcass as he spoke. "I'll quarter this without skinning it," he said, and advised Mickey not to bother removing the skin unless it was worth dressing.

"The moose gives us the best meat and best skin of any of the animals," he said, going on to say that it could not be beaten for footwear. "Of course," he told Mickey, "we got pleasure out of the cow hides you gave us from the Halfway. We made moccasins out of them for the summer, and they were very strong and gave good wear on the tracking line. The steersmen and some of the oarsmen liked them because they were tough. But even though we tanned them the same way we do the mooseskin, they weren't warm enough for the winter." He was silent for a while as he inspected the carcass of a fine young animal, then, "The mooseskin is porous and we can get all the grease out, so there is nothing there to draw the frost," he said, explaining the warmth of the mooseskin moccasin. He sighed, "What we'll do without the moose if it should die out, I do not know."

Soon they were piling the meat on their sleds and heading for home. Mickey had his cariole full, and several carcasses left over, which he let the Indians pile and cache with their own, to be hauled away at some future date.

They broke their journey in two, stopping to camp as soon as the dogs gave any indication of weariness. It was

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a clear night. Before Mickey fell asleep he watched a big owl swoop down and pick up a small white rabbit that screeched and kicked wildly as it was borne off by its merciless captor. A wolf howled mournfully in the distance. Then, snores from the sleeping men.

It could not have been more than a quarter of an hour later when every man in the camp was sitting erect as a new noise assailed their ears. "Swish, swish, crackle!"

"Look!" the Indian Chief pointed to the Northern Lights, "to-night they make music as they dance!"

Mickey wanted to protest that scientists declare that the Aurora Borealis never makes a noise; but somehow he could not find words. For, when he could hear the music himself, how could he tell fifteen other men that there was no sound?

Mickey had been able to pick the lock on many of the secrets of the North. He had ferreted out the ways of the beaver by stealthy watching. He had learned that the porcupines achieve copulation, in spite of their quills, by hanging on the limb of a tree by their forepaws, then advancing towards each other, face to face, until, their object fulfilled, they drop to the ground and move sluggishly to feed upon whatever titbits they can steal from a nearby camp. He had traced down the fact that the female mink, who invites love-making like a street-wise hussy, will, upon the accomplishment of her ends, turn upon her lover and nip at him as he flees in terror, biting him in the tenderest places so that he may be rendered incapable of further pro-creation . . . if not mortally wounded.

But no amount of observation on his own part, or questioning of scientists, Indians or trappers, could give him any answer to the riddle of the Northern Lights. The nearest approach to an explanation being, There is an island which the old timers call "Mystery Island." It lies just off Echo Bay in Great Bear Lake. No snow stays on it, even when the days are at their coldest, and in the

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dark of the night a glow emanates from it. A glow, unlike anything of the earth ; but more like a rainbow or some heavenly thing.

They say the rays are radium rays ; and more than one man has hazarded a guess that Mystery Island is the home of the Aurora Borealis.

* * * *

The fox hunt Colin Fraser invited him up for, was not a hunt at all. It was, instead, a demonstration of "calling." For while they went out looking for a fox, as soon as they saw one out on the lake, they crept into a clump of willows and hid themselves there, while the two boys made chirping noises like a bed of mice.

Immediately the fox stopped in his tracks and cocked his head to listen to the thin thread of sound that came to him across the ice from the foot of the willows.

Satisfied that they had been heard, the two boys cut off all sound and sat, grave-faced and silent, waiting for the fox to move again.

As soon as he started forward, they resumed their chirping and the fox stopped to listen.

The boys gave a tiny cheep. Then for a space there was a silence during which nothing could be heard but their breathing, before the fox began to run with interest towards them.

Colin Fraser lifted his shot-gun to his shoulder and got ready to shoot. Carefully he measured the distance between himself and his prey, for he must not let it get so close that he would spoil the precious skin with shot:

Crack ! The fox staggered under the impact of the shot, but quickly recovered and dashed off across the lake.

"Don't fret yourself," Colin ordered Mickey, in his rich Scottish accent, "It's better this way than if I'd a blowed him to bits," he assured him. "He'll no run far with that shot in him, and the skin'll be perfect !"

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Then, to the two boys, "Better follow him up," he told them.

They gave chase and in less than half an hour were back with the fox. "He gave up pretty fast," they said, handing him over for skinning.

It was a lazy winter, and before it was half over, Mickey made a trip home to Indiana to see his father and mother. It was now twenty-five years since he had left the town of Muncie where he had been born, bred and raised.

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HIS sister Blanche came down from New York, Nola came from Detroit, Ruth came over from Boise, Amber came up from Los Angeles, and the Ryans talked all night.

Every sentence seemed to begin with, "Do you remember?" The creek where they had gone swimming, the old grey pony and cart, Grandmother Ryan and her peppermint candies, Grandfather Ross' fast stepping horses.

Then: "How's Aunt Betty?"

"Some days she gets around fine, other days she'll stay in bed for a week." "How's Uncle Dick?"

"Still able to wear his hair on Sundays." A pause, then, reflectively, "Your Uncle Bake was borned with more brains than your Uncle Dick, but he stayed home where he could smell his mother's dishpan all his life; so he never really gev himself a chance."

"How's your sister, Dad?" Mickey enquired pleasantly, realizing that it was so long since he had seen his aunt he could not pin a name on her.

"Oh, she married a Scotchman," John Ryan shook his head mournfully. "He sure vaccinated her. She

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got so she'd make them kids of hers sit on the toilet-seat and then tell them ghost stories, because it was cheaper than castor oil."

A pause, then, mouth-watering, "Do you remember the way Grandfather Ross used to bring us in backbone?"

Dolly Ryan let a sigh out of her. "Every time they butchered a hog out there, he took us in some backbone." Another sigh. "I like pig meat better than any other kind of meat," she said. "But the spareribs you buy in the stores, don't taste like the backbone you get off your own."

Mickey looked around the neat apartment. A radio blared above them. Another blared below.

"Do you like living in an apartment house?" he asked his mother now, bluntly.

Instead of answering she got resolutely to her feet. "It's time I set some coffee on to perk or we'll all starve," she said with dignity. There was in her voice all the pent-up longing of the years . . . longing for a home of her own, with a tree to sit under of a summer's evening, and a bit of good Hoosier soil in which she could grow cabbages and carrots and old-fashioned pinks.

Bob Foster came in to see him then. "Do you remember the time we turpented the goat?" he asked as he shook Mickey's hand, and both men went into loud guffaws at the memory of it, although it was now thirty years since the two lads had put their heads together to bring up the idea of turpenting the big Billy goat that was the bane of their lives.

A farmer had come into the blacksmith shop to get his horse shod, and while the shoes were being fitted and nailed he told of how a neighbour's dog had been coming around his yard, stealing eggs and frightening the hens. "So," he told John Ryan, "I rubbed a smidgin of turpentine under his tail." He paused in his recital and spat before saying with satisfaction, "and now he don't come around there no more."

The boys listened, exchanging a meaningful look as they turned their eyes to the old Billy goat that was standing

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around the yard, chewing meditatively while he watched every move that was made in or around the blacksmith shop. Knowing better than to tackle John Ryan or one of his hired men, the goat also knew that he had the two boys at his mercy, and as soon as they would bend over to pick up a shoe or gather up a handful of nails, he would accept it as a signal to rush over and butt their well-rounded rears with his forehead, sending them face-down into whatever refuse might be lying on the floor. And in a blacksmith shop there is only one kind.

As soon as the farmer went off with his heavy legged horse, Mickey and his pal went looking for a bottle of turpentine. They found it easily enough ; but it was more than half empty and the boys held hurried consultation as to whether this might be enough for turpentinaing a goat.

"He said a smidgin," Bob Foster said, eyeing the bottle consideringly.

"My father would say a smidgin of whiskey'd be enough for a drink." Mickey inspected the turpentine. "We'll try this anyway," he decided. "Then if it's not enough, we'll wait until we get hold of a full bottle."

It was enough. And as soon as the turpentine was applied under the goat's tail, he let a baa out of him that made a fire alarm sound like a penny whistle, and jumped up on a pile of lumber.

Another wild baa, and he jumped down again.

Then he headed for the blacksmith shop, baa'ing as he ran.

"Baa ! Baa !"

Frightened horses plunged in terrified runaway down the narrow streets, dragging reluctant rigs behind them. Hub cap caught on passing hub caps and buggies and carts turned over, horses fell, while men rushed from the stores into the noisy street ; the bravest of them peeling off his coat as he ran to fling in the face of a pair of runaways, while another dashed to sit upon the head of a young mare,

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tangled in harness and struggling desperately to get to her feet.

"Come on and give me a hand!" the word went up.

John Ryan was chasing the goat.

"Baa! Baa!" it went, as it dashed helter skelter, with John Ryan at his heels, while the whole neighbourhood came out to watch the rumpus.

The police came; but by that time the goat was standing on the railroad tracks, flicking his tail and chewing his cud as if nothing had happened.

"We'd better send for the vet," the police decided, and when the veterinary surgeon came, to the delight of the boys, he diagnosed the sudden outbreak as "a very bad case of hydrophobia," and ordered that the goat be destroyed immediately. At which Bob Foster whispered to Mickey, "If that old vet had as much turpentine in the same spot as the goat, he'd have hydrophobia, too, I bet!"

Mickey went down to the blacksmith shop and took a turn at the bellows while he talked to his father. "How're things?" he wanted to know.

John Ryan kept his eyes from meeting his son's. "Fair to middling, but no better," he admitted. Then, "I have a feeling this depression is going to last a long time." He toyed with a piece of iron. "I have no hope it'll soon be over." Then, looking at Mickey piteously, "How'm I going to look after them all if there's no work?"

Mickey tried to cheer him up, but it was hopeless. "I'm getting to be an old man now," he said. "I've seen hard times before. I can smell them coming. And boy, she's coming this time worse'n a blizzard!"

"It's likely to last a long time all right," Mickey said, "and you'll start getting your family home again."

John Ryan nodded.

"It's time you retired anyway," Mickey went on, and John Ryan's shoulders slumped, admitting their weariness. "And if you had a farm, if any of the children wanted

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to come home they'd have a place to live until things start getting better, and they could help around. That way they'd feel they were paying their way."

John Ryan nodded again.

"So we'll start looking for a place where we can set you up," Mickey told him, and John Ryan brightened perceptibly.

But it soon became evident to Mickey that there was something more than the depression troubling his father. Every time they stopped to speak to some old friend on the street, John Ryan would fidget and fuss until they were on their way again, until Mickey was forced to ask him why he was behaving in such an unfriendly manner.

John Ryan pulled at his moustache uneasily as he muttered something about everything being all right; then making up his mind to make a clean breast of it, he began to talk.

"You remember when you sent me the money and I went up visiting you?" Mickey nodded, "and I had such luck and caught the fisher in the trap I set out, and all?"

Mickey grinned, remembering the excitement in the community when his father, deciding to do a little trapping, caught a fisher in the first trap he set out, to the envy of every trapper around and the delight of the visitor. "Well, when I came back here," John Ryan went on, "everyone kept a-asking me how things were, and how you were doing and all, and——" he stopped in confusion, but Mickey nodded to him to continue.

"Well, when they kept a-asking how you were doing, I couldn't keep from bragging a mite, and——" Embarrassment overwhelmed him now, but Mickey said nothing to help him out, and the silence forced him to blurt out, "I told them that what the Ball Brothers were to Muncie, the Ryan Brothers were to Canada!"

"Phew!" Mickey winced under the enormity of the exaggeration. "But the Ball Brothers own the whole

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town here, practically," Mickey exclaimed, when he could find his voice.

John Ryan nodded mutely, and they walked along slowly. Mickey running his keen blue eyes over the city in which every building of importance was at least partly Ball-owned, where every worth-while project was Ball-backed, and where the name meant more than the money. It stood for leadership, community interest and benevolence ; but it took in the Country Club and the Rotarians, too.

"I can remember the Balls from the time I was no higher than a duck," he said now, "They had everything and——"

John Ryan tugged at his son's arm. "You won't say anything to make a liar out of me, will you?" he pleaded, and Mickey promised. With the result that when his friends tried to pry some information out of him about his business in the North, he trailed them off into talking about something else until his cousin Wylie cried out in protest. "You didn't soften up too much when you gave up prize fighting, did you?" he wanted to know. "Haven't gone all genteel?" he enquired. Then, consideringly, "You have got that streak of gentle blood in you from your mother's side. Always *was* abragging about her grandmother that come from Virginia or somewheres. You haven't gone and turned out too much like *them*, have you?" he demanded.

Mickey could find nothing to say and Wylie continued, "Making a living too easy is bad for a man," he assured Mickey, "And I've been kind of worried about you since I've been hearing about how well you done up North." He probed at Mickey with his kindly blue eyes. "I used to be proud of you when you were fighting," he said with a little touch of tenderness, "I felt awful bad when your hand got broke up. I guess," he forced the compliment from him with an effort, "I guess I was as proud of you when you fought on the same card with Farmer Burns and Frank Gotch, as if you'd a been made President!"

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Mickey laughed a little self-consciously. "My proudest day was the time I got the chance to carry Jim Jeffries' bag." He could smile now at the boy he was then. "Although I will admit," he went on, "I was pretty puffed up the night I refereed a bout Jack Dempsey won from some fellow in the Boise arena."

"Too bad you didn't get to stick to fighting," Wylie said sorrowfully. "You'd have been a great fighter."

In time it was the talk of Muncie that the Ryan Brothers had bought their father and mother a farm. A brick house, no less; with an orchard, and several teams of Percheron horses. And their own gas well!

The relatives came to see the farm. They came and admired and were a little envious. Once home, however, they could not refrain from saying what was in their minds. "It's nice the boys are buying their parents a good house," they commended, "but," they croaked, "*did they get the money honest?*"

"The Ryans were always used to buying from hand to mouth. Now they say the boys went down and bought tinned stuff enough to start a grocery store with."

Mickey laughed at that. "I've always been used to buying a year's supply at a time in the North," he told them: but they found it hard to believe. "There just isn't money enough in the world to buy a year's stock of stuff at a time with," they declared.

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MICKEY had tied up all his available capital in the farm for his parents; "But with the prospects we've got we won't miss it," he told Pat upon his return to the North, as he began to push ahead with his plans for

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handling the enormous quantities of freight that were to be shipped in after break-up.

"It's getting so we'll have to put our men under contract," he said to Pat. "Too many of them let us pay their way in here. Then, they're hardly more than started working for us before they drift off prospecting : and the mining men and prospectors have no conscience at all about stealing our employees : so we'd better tie them up tight at the beginning of the year."

They did.

Almost as soon as the ink was dry upon the contracts, word came through from one mining company after another that they would be unable to proceed with their plans and would have no need of freighting facilities across the northern portage this year. The depression which had struck at the "outside" the year before, had now hit the North.

"So now we have the pleasure of paying the men's wages and feeding them good for the season," was Mickey's only comment. But all through that year there was the nagging worry of how to find the money to carry on until things picked up again. There were parleys with bank managers ; blank refusals to advance more money ; pleadings for just a little more time ; and the time would be given, only to find at the end of it that things were as hopeless as before.

"A man who would take all his working capital and put it into a house for his father and mother doesn't seem like a good bet to me," one of the bank directors in the city said firmly.

"That's the very thing that makes him seem like a good bet to me," another said ; and he got the money.



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"There's no use paying the men and feeding them for nothing," Mickey declared. "It'd be bad for them, anyway, to sit around doing nothing." So he set them to work, and by the end of the year the road was in such condition

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that the merchants in Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald ordered trucks from the city, the trappers bought cars, and all of them went into the freighting business on the side.

"Next year there'll be no business for us," Pat was sure ; and Mickey's head nodded in half agreement.

"They can haul freight or passengers for whatever price they can get ; then turn the key in the car if the weather goes against them," Pat went on. "You shouldn't ever have fixed up that road, Mickey !" he harped.

Mr. Brownlee, the Premier of the Province of Alberta, came visiting shortly after that, and when he complimented Mickey on the fine road he had built, he was met with a bitter, "You might as well enjoy it now ; for we're going to have to stop keeping it up."

The Premier snapped back a surprised "Why ?"

"Well," Mickey drawled, "We can't afford to spend the money on the upkeep of the road, then have the people around use their cars and trucks to haul at any price they can get, while the weather is fine. His lips set in a thin line. "The only way we can live is to wallow through the mud, for then we have no competition," he declared.

Mr. Brownlee was plainly perturbed. "We can't have that," he soothed. "Just as the country is getting some notice, too." He picked at a button on his coat, then, resolutely : "We'll have to do something to give you some protection, Mickey." His forehead was wrinkled with concern. "Next time you're in Edmonton, drop down to the House, and we'll get together and see what can be done."

With that promise Mickey had to be content, and the season wore on and out before he got into Edmonton.

Mr. Brownlee was very frank. No money could be spent on a road that far North, especially as the highways close to the city were in need of repair and remaking, and if the Government were to undertake the maintenance of an out-of-the-way road like the Portage it would cause a

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tremendous amount of dissatisfaction, while placating only a few.

"Would you keep the road up if you get exclusive use of it?" Mr. Brownlee asked presently, hurrying to add, "Of course the prices you'd charge for hauling freight would have to be subject to the Board of Utilities Commission."

"I'd be satisfied all right," Mickey told him, "but I don't want to stop any of the people that have been using the road," his voice was firm. "There are a few old people in there that have been making their living with the little bit of freight they haul across the Portage, and the merchants who have their own trucks should be allowed to haul their own freight."

"Then suppose we issue to you the only commercial freighting license for your trucks and passenger cars," Mr. Brownlee suggested.

Mickey squirmed uneasily in his chair. "I'd better warn you," he told Mr. Brownlee, "that if you give me a license like that you'll be pestered with petitions from all the people up there. In the wintertime especially," he forced a chuckle, "they don't have much to do except write out petitions and letters complaining about the other fellow."

Mr. Brownlee tried to dismiss the subject with a wave of the hand, but Mickey went on seriously, "Some of the merchants up there will be writing to the wholesalers saying they can't pay their bills on account of they're not allowed to haul freight across the Portage; or we charge so much that they made no profit."

Mr. Brownlee slapped Mickey's shoulder affectionately. "We'd get as much hollering from around here if we spent any money on the road up there," he said heartily. Then, "In politics you get used to squawking!"

But nothing the Provincial Government had ever experienced had prepared them for the vituperative letters

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that came out of the North when word of the granting of the franchise got around.

Pat Ryan's face grew long under the criticism that flooded the Edmonton papers. "Some of these people that are doing the most shouting," he declared, "are the people we're always helping out."

Mickey tried to laugh it off with, "Trouble's just the fiddle of their hearts ; and if they're not making bother for themselves, they're making it for somebody else."

It was not long after that when J. K. Cornwall stopped over at the Halfway for dinner ; and before he left he called Mickey to one side. "I want to speak to you privately," he told him ; and when they were alone : "Now, Mickey, I want to put you wise to something," he said, putting an arm around his friend's shoulder. "There's a bunch of fellows has formed a delegation to go in and wait on the Premier about the Portage. They're going in on the next train ; and they're going to protest about you having the only right to haul freight over it and—" Then he finished lamely, with an awkward, "I wanted to put you wise to it." He waited for Mickey to say something.

"Let them hop to it," Mickey said roughly. "I have nothing to hide," and returned to his work.

But when he found that the same J. K. Cornwall was the man who had gone in to Edmonton to act as spokesman for the delegation, his rage boiled over.

"He rode across the Portage on one of our trucks," he said scornfully, "then came in and padded his belly out with Ryan food ; while all the time he was on his way out to raise hell against me !"

"For gosh's sake, why pick on him ?" Pat wanted to know, "Half the fellows in the delegation is also obligated to you *heavy* : but that doesn't keep them from trying to run you out of business."

Mickey was called to the floor of the Provincial House to face an enquiry into the running of the road. He met

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the questions with ready answers ; then started his own defence. "This Government knows," he said quietly, "what it costs to keep up a stretch of road. They're in the business. They have files and can check on every item of cost of upkeep. They know, too, the damage the Alberta winters can do. They know what the summer rains can do, too." He paused before going on to point out that up on the Portage they had no gravel to work with and were forced to use a corduroy foundation, sanded over, and call that a road.

"When the weather is good," he told them, "we get a leveller out there and get the road all sanded and smooth so the freight whizzes across it in no time. But one good rain," he went on, "leaves us stuck in a ditch, and the road to make all over again."

He produced his accounts. They were gone over and considered.

He kept the franchise.

He kept the hate of the people who had petitioned against him, too. They continued to write letters and draw up petitions and mail them to the Provincial and Federal Governments, declaring that it was "un-British and without precedent to give one man control of the North by granting him freighting privileges across the sixteen miles of road that was the bottleneck through which all the supplies for the country beyond must go."

They talked about it to every visitor to the country, deploring the way such an arrangement was holding up the development of the country ; then adding, naively, "We see no reason why we should not carry a little freight or a couple of passengers if we happen to be crossing the Portage. It would help us pay for our gasoline."

"What I can't stand," some of his friends complained, "is that one day they'll be on the telephone asking you to take one of their children in to the hospital, and you'll drop everything and do it. And the next day they'll

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come to you wanting to borrow a hundred dollars and you'll lend it to them ; then the day after that they'll be signing another petition against you."

Mickey forced a grin. "They say you've got to turn the cheek seventy-times-seven," he said mildly. Then, fiercely, "But some day I'm afraid I'll get confused in my figuring and think I'm past the forgiving mark," he declared.

Many times Mickey approached the Government and asked them to take the road over from him. "It's causing too much hard feelings," he would say ; but the answer was always the same. "We haven't the money to keep the road up." And when Mickey would suggest that it would be easier for him to let the road go back to its original mire, he would be reminded that the future of the North depended upon the road, and that it must be kept open.

Every man working for Mickey was conscious of the importance of the road if the country beyond it were to go ahead. Sometimes they had to work seventy-two hours without rest or sleep in order that the freight might move across the Portage and be loaded on the boats for the Arctic ; and oftentimes, when a heavy fall of rain came just as the cargo from the south arrived, they would roll out of their beds to spend the night fixing the road so that no time might be lost out of the short season of open-water. For if the boats were late in making their return trip from the Arctic, they might be trapped by the ice, frozen in for the winter, and wrecked when the break-up came in the spring.

The men talked about these things in the bunk-house. The older, regular hands passing on the wisdom of their years to the "Intellectual Roughnecks" that came up to work for the summer ; most of them being University Students who wanted a quick way to make easy money which would carry them through their winter's study.

If, at times during the summer, they had doubts about their money being made easy, at least it was "quick,"

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and the food was good. "None better anywhere," the old teamsters would assure them. "Chicken every Sunday ; and the boss eats the same as us ! "

As soon as a boat had been loaded and work slackened off a bit, the men would roll into their bunks and sleep until there was no sleep left in them. Then they would begin to prop themselves up on their pillows and tell stories while the young men would, in the parlance of Pat Murphy, "begin to theorize on life."

Mickey liked to drop in on these sessions and hear the men argue ; the teamsters getting in "their ten cents worth," whether the argument was on medicine or religion.

Mickey listened in one day while a young medical student declared that the future of the world lay in the hands of the surgeon. The people would be as he decided. Mickey listened while the lad built up his argument. "If you cut a dog's tail for a couple of generations, dogs begin to appear in the litter minus their tails." He eyed Pat Murphy now. "If I cut off your left arm, and I cut off your son's left arm, pretty soon all the Murphys would be minus left arms." Pat Murphy began to shudder. "So if the surgeons keep on at work removing the appendix, and removing the gall bladder, it stands to reason pretty soon people'll be born without them."

A gloomy silence fell on the bunk house. They were all men of the North, having a certain rough male pride in their own flesh, and they had that horror of mutilation that flows so strong through simple people.

Mickey felt their mood, and stood for a moment in perplexity. Then, turning to the young medical student, "You sound like you had a pretty good argument there," he told him, and the lad beamed. "But," Mickey went on, with a half grin, "The Jews have been doing a pretty fair share of snipping off for a lot of generations now. How come, if your theory is right ; how come, they have to keep on snipping ? "

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MICKEY might be short of ready money ; but there was always comfort in the thought that he had a sound asset in the ranch on the Slave River. The wheat grown on it tested No. 2 Northern, he was having better luck with his cattle since he had stopped bringing in the run of the market and given orders to ship in only Shorthorns.

Pat, who liked to watch White-Faces moving across an emerald field, protested ; but Mickey talked him down. "The Herefords are too wild and mean for the amount of handling it takes to get them in here," he said, pointing out that they had to be loaded on the train at Edmonton, transferred to barges or scows at Waterways, then run off at the Ranch to wait for butchering, when they would be loaded on a barge or scow again and shipped to Fitzgerald to be driven across the sixteen mile Portage to Fort Smith.

"The Shorthorns are more domesticated," he said, and so they proved.

"It's a good thing we've got the ranch, with the way things are doing," Pat would say. "This depression is getting out of hand."

"It's going to last quite a while ; but as long as we've got the Ranch we'll at least be able to eat," Mickey liked the feeling of security he got from owning the property across from the Buffalo Park. He enjoyed the little gasp of surprise that came from "Outsiders" as they ran down the gangplank of the northern steamboat and climbed up to the group of buildings that nestled among the spruce and poplar. He took pride in his horses and cattle and garden and meadowlands ; but most of all he delighted in hearing the cries of astonishment that came when they

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found that every building on the ranch, blacksmith shop, barns and house, could have its own light at the turn of a switch.

"Electricity this far North!" the cries came. Then, puzzled, "Fort Smith just has oil lamps and candles, hasn't it?"

Mickey would nod and say, "We put in our own power plant. It makes it nicer for the Help."

And women all over the North would complain bitterly that "Mickey Ryan's Help is better off than the white women!"

And now Mickey kept urging that more hay be made and stacked. "We've got so many cattle to feed and all the horses, we want to be sure we don't get caught short in case of bad weather."

"But, Mick," Pat would say, "We've got along so far. Luck's been with us."

"Yes," Mickey would agree, "but if we were to get a dry spell, or a heavy hailstorm or something, we want to be sure we've got hay on hand. For if *we* haven't got it, where'll we get it from?"

Pat shook his head. He did not know.

* * * *

"Fifteen hundred tons of hay in the bank!" Mickey eyed it with pride. "Looks like we're all right now, even if a bad spell does come," he said confidently. The men were haying and the crop was good. "We're out of the woods," he said, and that night he felt the first let-up of anxiety in years.

The following spring he had to go out to Edmonton, and as he flew back to Fitzgerald, he began to watch the terrain below with interest. The rivers were running fast and free, and all danger of ice jams and consequent flooding was over for this year.

Mickey noted that every cabin they passed had its ladder running up to a nearby tree, where a platform had been

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set up to provide a camping place in case the river rose sufficiently to make the shack uninhabitable.

At McMurray, where the ice always packed up, forming a strong dam until the water mustered enough force to drive it on again, the people were breathing easier, for every year brought fear of flood to them. And spring and break-up always brought stories of the time the river had risen fifty-seven feet in four hours to overflow and drown all the oxen and carry away most of the supplies, so that near-famine had been the lot of the community until the first boat arrived.

Mickey re-boarded the plane at McMurray and settled himself down to enjoy the last lap of his journey, which would take him winging over his own ranch. Before long he would be soaring above the red-roofed buildings that rested, cosy and secure, within the wide brown circle of ploughed earth that formed a fire guard around them. The fields would be showing green after the heavy rains, and the huge haystacks the colour of oatmeal after the winter's larruping.

Watching for this picture, he almost missed seeing the ranch below ; for now the green fields were inundated by the muddy waters of the Slave, and the haystacks were mounds that rose like weather-beaten rocks out of the filthy lake.

Mickey tried to make himself believe that he was seeing a mirage. He closed his eyes, then opened them. But there were no green fields dotted with haystacks ; and only the house on the rise stood proof that he was passing the ranch of which he had been so proud.

He looked across at the Buffalo Park, but there was no sign of flood there. And if the river had risen sufficiently to flood his meadowlands, then it should have gone over and inundated the Park, which was much lower.

He glanced back at the Ranch, and knew that, whatever the cause, it was flooded.

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Flood! Mickey knew its devastating power. Knew that, having once taken ruthless possession of a piece of land, it would depart only to return again and again with each rising of the river. And every summer brought at least three risings.

When he got into Fitzgerald, he ordered the engineer to get the gas-boat out and, without waiting to eat or talk to anyone, he stepped aboard the *Kathleen* and headed for the Ranch.

It took four hours to make the trip. "Thank God the house is on a rise," Mickey said as he came within sight of it. "The pasture land must be eighteen feet under water," he estimated, and, as he watched, he saw the swirling, brown, relentless waters reach his barn. It seemed but a moment before the walls began to buckle and go under.

Mickey's fists knotted and he would have raised them and shaken them against the grey sky had he had the power; but they seemed paralysed. After a bit they rushed involuntarily to his lips, and ground themselves hard against his mouth to keep him from blasphemy.

It took a long moment before he got control of himself.

"It must have come up pretty fast." He had to say something, and Charlie Helker was at his elbow now.

"The men were out in the field balin' hay to take in to the Halfway," Charlie told him, "and first thing they knew the water started to come in; and they had to take their overalls off and cut them up to make strips to tie logs together to make a raft to get to the house."

Mickey was climbing into one of the skiffs now, "Come on, Charlie," he urged, "we'd better go round up what cattle we can find and get them up on the hill here."

Charlie got into the skiff, and Mickey put the oars in the lock and started to row.

"The horses swum up to the hill," Charlie commented, "and the men's been herdin' the cattle up there." He

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was quiet a moment. "I'm afeart we'll be losin' all the calves." He looked at Mickey's grey face. "Seventy calves is a lot of calves," he grieved. Then, "'Twas hard to hear them bawlin' and not be able to do anythin' for them!"

Mickey pulled at the oars and headed for a couple of steers that were huddled together, knee deep in water. "There's a bit of a rise where they're standin'," Charlie commented, "but I guess they're afeart to move, on account of the water's deep just a little ways from there."

Carefully they herded the cattle, slinging a rope around the horns of the more timid ones and pulling them to dry ground, until all that could be saved were safe.

"We'd better get some hay up to them," Mickey said now, and they went after some of the haystacks that were still floating around; but it seemed as if the best hay had been carried off down the river. Mickey's arms ached already from rowing; but he kept at the work of hauling haystacks behind the small boat and piling them on the ground beside the cattle, until the last stack was in.

The men fell wearily into their bunks; but Mickey could not rest. "I'd better go and cruise around and see what's what," he said.

"Oh, come on to bed," they told him, "You can find out *why* it flooded to-morrow."

* * * *

Next morning, not having slept all night, Mickey could tell them: "I've got it all figured out." His voice was like burnt wood. "The hay meadows used to be a lake a long time ago; and the beavers built a dam across the stream that fed it, so the lake dried up." He paused, then continued in a choked voice, "When the jam came about ten miles farther along the river, it pushed the water over the old beaver dam; and we've got the lake again."

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"You mean," the men were unbelieving, "You mean we're going to have the water here *all the time!*"

Mickey nodded. He could not force any words to come now.

"You mean we won't have the ranch any more?"

Mickey nodded again.

"Can't we do anything?" The men looked at him now, asking him to lead them. And Mickey smarted under his own helplessness.

"We could dig a ditch to take the water out," Mickey said quietly, and the faces brightened; only to cloud again as the burnt-out voice went on, "But every time we had high water on the river we'd have high water here."

"That finishes ranching in the North then!" one of the men cried in dismay; and there was no one to argue against him.

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"**WE'VE** got to go into trucks *strong*," Mickey said. "We'll just have to get the road so it'll carry them," he declared.

Shortly after that he was saying, "I've bought a couple of Linn tractors and some sleighs and equipment from the Hudson's Bay Company that they had at Churchill."

Pat Murphy looked out from his blacksmith shop and his face was grave. "Looks like before long we won't be having any horses around here," he lampooned.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mickey said quietly. "It's pretty awkward in this country to get feed for horses and——" he hesitated. Then boldly, "You've got to have progress!"

"Yeah," Pat Murphy agreed. "You've got to have progress. Dogs to horses; then horses to engines. Then engines to aeroplanes. It's going on all the time." He

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was sad. Then : "You can't let these Indians around here drive them tractors," he put forward now, "and most of us old fellows can't start learning about tractors at our age. What'll you do?"

"Bring in someone," Mickey told him.

He did not have to look for someone to operate the tractors, however, for following close on the heels of the machines, came the man who had been operating them at Churchill, a point approximately fifteen hundred rail-miles from the Portage.

"My name is Payne," he told Mickey, "Tom Payne." His voice placed him immediately as an Englishman. "I'm an Old Country Englishman," he admitted unnecessarily. Then, "But I *can* work," he declared, going on to plead for a chance to go up on the Portage with the tractors.

While he talked Mickey was sizing him up. The big well-muscled shoulders told their own story of hard work; the hands were a store-house of power, and the blue eyes beneath the shock of unruly fair hair gave promise of steadiness.

"You know these tractors, and are familiar with them," Mickey told him quietly. "So you can go to work unloading them off the trains in Edmonton," and before Tom could say anything, he hurried on with "'Get them into the Watrous Machine Shop," he advised, and see that they're all right before you take them up to the jungles."

Tom nodded his thanks, and went to work.

"He knows the tractors all right," Mickey said, but Pat cut off any hope of his being with them long by saying, "He only came in here so he could get a grub stake and go prospecting. He——"

"He's only been here a year," Mickey said shortly. "That means he's only had five months' work. That won't go far towards a grub stake."

He was satisfied for the moment that Tom would be working for him for some time. But something in Pat's

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face disturbed him. "You're not thinking of grub staking him?" he demanded a little fiercely. Pat coloured. "Well, if you're thinking of it, get it right out of your mind. He doesn't know this country to begin with. You've grub staked enough fellows now to have made ten strikes and got nothing out of it. You take my advice and leave this fellow Payne alone," he advised.

But occasionally he would come upon Pat, Billy Wilson, his book-keeper, and Tom Payne, with their heads together figuring on paper, while their faces wore that look of eager excitement that told Mickey they were planning an expedition.

"Don't waste your money on that fellow Payne," Mickey would exhort. "He's no prospector." Then, with a chuckle, "Besides I need him here with the tractors."

In 1932 Tom Payne told Mickey he was leaving for Bear Lake. "I'm going prospecting," he announced. "There's gold up there." The cold blue eyes had that bewitched look that comes when a man is seeing Gold . . . far off and away somewhere.

When he had gone Mickey went to Pat. "I don't mind you getting in the odd poker game," he said, "for while you never win anything you're a good player and get your fun out of playing. But you never had any luck!"

Pat admitted it a little wryly.

"But grub staking a fellow like Payne is just throwing your money away," he went on. "He doesn't know the the country. He's not a prospector. What did you do it for?" Then, bitterly, "All you've accomplished is losing me a good fellow on the tractors."

Pat muttered something about he had a hunch that this time they were going to strike it rich.

"When'll you ever get over the idea that there's easy money to be made in the North?" Mickey demanded. "Haven't you learnt by now that you may make a dollar, but that it's danged hard to hang on to it?"

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In 1934 word came that Tom Payne was moving over to Hottah Lake.

Mickey went to Pat again. "I suppose you're still grub staking him?"

Pat shook his head. "Only part," he said reluctantly. Then, "Billy Wilson's in on it, too."

"Well, if you want to spend your money that way, I don't suppose anything I say will stop you. But why you want to make a danged fool out of yourself grub staking a fellow for three years straight, without making a strike, is beyond me! It's ridiculous! you'll never get your money back!" he warned.

Pat mumbled something about sticking to one horse; but Mickey stormed back with, "No one but a fool grub stakes anyone more than *two* years!"

Mickey promised himself that he would keep an eye on Pat and see that he stopped this nonsense of pouring his money out on supplies for a prospector that knew nothing about prospecting; but he never kept his promise, for in the spring of 1934, when his fourth child was born, Katie developed flu; and when the baby was two weeks old, she died.

The days that followed were grief-stricken, hectic days.

"The baby won't keep a thing on his stomach," and the Grey Nuns struggled to keep life in the little body. "He'll need a lot of care," they advised at last, when they had found a formula that would agree with him, and Mickey got a nurse to take care of him.

It was about that time that he decided to make Edmonton his headquarters. "The children will be better off in a city, with a school close by," and he went in and began to search for a house.

When he had found a low bungalow that seemed to suit him, he got ready to move. "How about the baby? He'll have to have fresh milk. You'll never get *that* on the boat," the nurse advised him; but Mickey solved

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that problem by taking a cow aboard and milking her before every feeding time.

He had the children set up in the house and was ready to return to the Halfway, when he met Anne Swain, the little schoolteacher from Fort Smith, who was holidaying in the city. She had been his wife's best friend. They talked of her, of the children, of the future.

A year later they were married.

It had been a busy year. Mickey hardly noticed when Pat told him that Tom Payne had moved up to Yellow-knife.

* * * *

Mining developments in the North brought new and unexpected demands upon the Hudson's Bay Company for supplies and transportation. And finding themselves in need of an extra boat to work the territory north of Fort Smith they came to Mickey suggesting that he might try to take their boat, *Pelly Lake*, now working out of Fitzgerald, across the Portage to freight supplies down river and across lake to the booming mining camps of the North-West Territories.

"The road would never carry a boat of that size in the summer," Mickey told them, "But we might rig up some way to haul it after the frost got into the ground," he said hopefully.

"You're not going to attempt to haul a boat weighing a hundred and twenty-five tons across the Portage?" Pat was aghast.

"No reason why I shouldn't try," Mickey said, and went about making plans.

That fall the camp was kept open waiting for winter to set in. The road was rutted with two deep ruts that cut far into the sand, spaced to take the runners of a heavy sleigh; and then Mickey and his crew went about making a water tank with which to spray and ice it. For he now had a plan in his mind whereby he would build a sleigh

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strong enough to carry the *Pelly Lake*, with runners that would fit into the deep, iced ruts, and be held by them to the centre of the road.

"You'll never get a water tank to work in fifty below weather, or worse," they told him, but Mickey went on working on a submarine stove, made from an empty gasoline barrel, and fed with wood and fuel oil to provide a heat that would keep the water running free for the sprinkling and icing of the ruts.

When the sleigh had been built and the road between Fort Fitzgerald and Fort Smith given a thick coat of ice, the snow had to be shovelled from the long hill leading down from Fort Smith to the yards, so that the sandy surface might provide a brake for the heavy load as it moved down towards its destination. Mickey then announced that they would back the boat up, load it on the sleigh and start the trek across the sixteen mile Portage.

"They'll never get it more'n two or three miles out of Fitzgerald," everybody said. "The ice'll melt under the friction of such a heavy load and the runners'll stick once they work through to the sand."

"It'll make a fine road monument," they laughed. "He's bit off more'n he can chew this time!"

Mickey's men had no laughter in them. For three months they had been preparing for this day, working in the bitter cold on the road and at the sleigh, and before night came they would know whether all their toil had been in vain.

Signals were given a last minute rehearsal; the big Linn tractor that would do the hauling was backed into place; chains, runners and bunks were inspected, and the signal was given to start.

Out in front Mickey, in mukluks, sealskin pants and mink parki, moved ahead, walking backwards, raising one hand or the other in pre-arranged signal that guided them past danger spots, until six hours later they rumbled their way through the settlement of Fort Smith, then down the

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long hill to the river bank where the big boat would rest until after the spring break-up when she would take to the water.

Those who had cameras brought them, and Mickey was pleased at the interest shown by the townspeople in the transportation of the huge boat.

"Only six hours on the Portage!" they exclaimed in astonishment, and Mickey grinned with pleasure under their words.

"It's pretty encouraging," he said with satisfaction, "It'll make it a lot easier to get people to come in here bringing heavy machinery and stuff if we can freight it across for them." His face was radiant, for now the North which had been shut off, first by sixteen miles of dangerous rapids, then by as many miles of almost as impassable trail, was now thrown open.

The next couple of days were spent in closing up the camp; and then the entire crew flew out to Edmonton for a well deserved binge.

The rest of the men were free to go their way and enjoy themselves; but Mickey was no sooner in the city than he had to start preparing statements in reply to the petitions that had come out from the North against him.

"It took him only six hours to haul a boat across the Portage, and for six hours work he charged five thousand dollars." Affidavits were forwarded declaring this to be true, and the Government requested to *see that this robbery be stopped and justice meted out to the good people of the North* who had to stand patiently by and watch one man grow rich while they had to be content with the meagre living they could wrest from the country in the short Northern summers.

The Premier of the Province summoned Mickey to his office, and showing him the affidavits and petitions, looked at him questioningly.

Mickey admitted their truth; adding wrathfully, "But they're only giving you half a bottle. The sleigh alone cost

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me a thousand dollars ; and I had a gang of men working on the road for three months before we could move the boat a foot," he told them. "Then we all had to fly out."

He showed his books, and the matter was dropped for the time being. One old-timer muttering, "He's outsmarted us this time ; but if the day ever comes he tries to haul a boat across the Portage the other way, then he'll meet his Waterloo ! Then we won't have to worry any more about him !"

Mickey chuckled, for he never expected to be foolish enough to try to haul a big boat up the long hill from the Fort Smith yards. "With an eight per cent grade, and that 135 foot drop, you'd just be asking for trouble !"

28

THE next Fall the two Hudson's Bay Company boats *Margaret A* and *Pelly Lake* were pulled in to Fort Smith, and everyone came to gape at the *Margaret A* which had been caught in the ice the previous year and all the North had thrilled to the story of the rescue of her crew by Stan McMillan of MacKenzie Air Service. Fortunately the boat had been exhumed from her icy tomb, and had been returned to service on the Northern waterways, arriving at Fort Smith in the Fall in time to avoid being caught in the ice a second time.

"We could use the *Pelly Lake* better out of Fitzgerald," the Company said, and asked Mickey would he move it back across the Portage.

Mickey, with an eye on the hill, wanted to say "No" ; but he could not. "Maybe it could be done," he said consideringly ; but there was no certainty in him.

"Better pull them out of the water a little farther,"

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he urged the dignified representative of the Hudson's Bay Company. "Sometimes the water jams up in the Fall of the year, and if it should do that this year, it would sweep your boats off their ways and——"

A splutter of indignation from the other man cut off Mickey's warning. "Everybody is always telling me what these rivers are going to do in the Summer and in the Fall, and twenty to one they're wrong."

Mickey ignored the spluttering. "It happens quite often," he pointed out. "And if those boats wash off their ways and get out into the ice, don't be wiring me after I get back to Edmonton, asking me to come in and pull them out," adding that it was a dirty job and could be avoided now at very little extra expense.,

Mickey went out to Edmonton soon after that, leaving Pat Murphy and Joe Lacombe to finish up any chores that needed doing, and close the camp before following him to the city.

Pat and Joe were out in the yard picking up tools and tidying the place, when the water rose so rapidly that it would be a matter of minutes only before the boats would be swept off their blockings.

Pat Murphy saw it first, and he let out a string of expressive oaths before plunging, dressed as he was, into the icy water. He called to Joe Lacombe to help him, and they waded out in their light moccasins to secure the boats.

With quick fingers they fixed cables to the boats, bow and stern, and attached the steel lines to tree trunks high up on the bank.

Then, satisfied, that they had done all they could, Pat Murphy headed for the telegraph office where he used up several pads of paper and most of his pithy vocabulary before he produced a telegram to Mickey that would be acceptable to the operator. It read: "What you predicted to that——" Once more he crossed out a word and changed it. "Man came true. The water raised. The

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boats is out and it is an awful mess. I hope you stand pat like you told him you would, and don't bother to touch them. Pat Murphy."

Hard on its heels came another telegram asking Mickey in the name of the Hudson's Bay Company to rush in and put the boats where they would be safe. For if they were left where they were the Company might as well give them up now for lost. Because if the encroaching ice from the hillside spring did not "get" them, when break-up came the piling ice and high water would.

Telegrams flew back and forth; and the New Year was well on its way before Mickey gathered up a crew and flew in with them to get the boats out of the ice, the road rutted and the Portage made.

Fort Smith came out of its near-hibernation then, and watched with interest as Mickey went about inspecting the boats, hiring local men, and within two days had the work started of chopping the boats out of their icy berths.

Now the thermometer dropped to fifty-three degrees below zero; but the men kept at the work of chopping ditches in the ice to divert the spring from the boats.

"Digging the ditches out is bad enough, but keeping them open is a devil of a job!" the men complained as they worked, while the temperature dropped to sixty below.

It rose to forty below the day they finished digging and got ready for the dangerous work of jacking the *Pelly Lake* up and lowering her on to the huge wooden runners on which her great bulk would "ski" over the icy road.

Now two big Linn tractors were brought up to haul the huge boat out of her cold berth. Tandemways they were hitched to the boat. The signal was given to move. The tractors started. The boat moved slowly forward, swaying drunkenly as she climbed the graduated side of the pit, but permitted her great bulk to be dragged heavily out.

Mickey was ready now to believe that the end of their enormous task was in sight, and that the *Pelly Lake* would

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be in Fort Fitzgerald before the day was out. He was passing his hopefulness on to the crew, when one of the wooden runners refused to stand the strain, and the ominous crack of its breaking struck hard at the men.

As they worked in the freezing slush from the overflow, with tools made cumbersome with ice, to jack up the boat again so that they could remove the broken runner, the men railed at the weather, their luck, and their own foolishness in attempting such a job.

At last the splintered runner was heaved up on one of the big tractors to be borne away to the shop where it would be used as a model in fashioning a new one; and at a signal from Mickey the driver started up the engine. The tractor moved forward, only to break through the shell-ice and airspace made by the overflow.

The men muttered now that Fate was against them, but Mickey was quick to tell them that Luck was surely with them, for had they broken through the ice with the boat in tow, nothing could have prevented it from upsetting; with the loss of a couple of lives a certainty.

"We'll have to stop taking chances," Mickey declared, and announced that they would clear the ice away from the springs, to provide a clear passage through which to move the boat, and the men set to work with needlepoints, picks and dynamite, under his direction.

In addition, Mickey decided to lighten the boat by stripping off the four inch coat of ice that barnacled the hull, adding several tons to the burden the wooden runners would have to carry.

It was impossible to chop through it with pick and needle-points as the sharp points would damage the frozen and brittle oak of the boat.

"We'll have to melt it off," Mickey declared, and the men laughed; while the townsfolk guffawed around the frost-bound fort.

Now Mickey had tarpaulins put all around the boat.

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Then he brought tubs and, filling them with wood and fuel-oil, set them under the boat before he started the fires that would melt the ice.

"We'll have to watch like hawks to see that the boat doesn't catch fire," he warned his men, "for the wood of the hull is probably well saturated with oil." But soon the dense smoke and the showers from the melting ice was making watching a task to try them to the utmost.

Rubbing at his smarting eyes, one of the men failed to notice that the ice had melted above his tub, and soon he was crying for help as the hull started to burn.

Mickey came running with a fire extinguisher, and after a few minutes' work with it, they could move on to continue the job of defrosting.

From time to time visitors came down from the settlement to see how the work was progressing, and to assure Mickey that even if he got the boat out on the road, he would never get it up the hill.

"The eight per cent. grade and hundred and thirty-five foot drop of the bank is going to beat you," they'd say, gloatingly, and go back to the town to report that Mickey Ryan had met his Waterloo at last.

"One false move and he'll go in the ravine!" they predicted.

Mickey knew the hazards of the job as well as anyone. And every night he lay awake for hours rehearsing and re-rehearsing every move in the trip from the water up the steep hill to Fort Smith, then across the Portage to Fort Fitzgerald.

"What're we going to do if we run into trouble on the hill?" the men wanted to know; and Mickey had no answer for them.

"If she ever starts to slip back, she would sweep everything before her," they would tell him. "A couple of them big tractors and a heavy boat sliding down a hill like that can gain an awful lot of momentum. I'd hate to be behind her!" they declared solemnly.

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Mickey's eyes were grey with trouble these days ; but he said little. The boat had to be stripped before they could move her, and he kept at work in spite of the smoke and steam and weariness that beset him.

"Sand comes pretty cheap in this country, and we'll have plenty of sand in a truck behind the boat and keep shovelling it in behind the runners," he said to the men, and they nodded their approval. But they were not satisfied.

"If the engines stalled for some reason and the tractors started to slip down that hill, I doubt whether sand would hold them," they fretted. "And how about the men behind the boat, shovelling the sand?" they wanted to know, fear in their eyes and on their faces.

"Both tractors are tuned up to the nines. There's nothing to worry about as far as the tractors are concerned," a voice said assuringly, and the men brightened a little.

The boat was stripped at last ; but Mickey kept putting off taking her up the hill, for he lacked within himself the assurance that he could make the grade, and he kept searching through the layers of his mind for some device upon which they could lean if they ran into trouble.

"I've got to figure out some way to take care of her in case she runs into trouble on the way up," he would say over and over. But his mind seemed bare of ideas.

The thermometer hung around sixty below, and Mickey was filled with the depression that always struck him with the cold weather. *Would he be able to get the boat up the hill? Or would this prove too much for him?*

Somehow its safe carriage across the Portage began to mean more to him than a job to be done. If he failed to accomplish this task, he felt that it would be but the beginning of the end. He would be beaten !

"As long as there's a doubt in my mind that I can do it," he told himself, "I'll never get it done." A long

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restless pause. Then, "I'll have to wait until I'm sure. And the only way to be sure is to figure out some extra precaution to take."

It took days of concentration on the problem before he found an answer. Then he went rushing out to the blacksmith shop at the Halfway.

Lighting the fire and donning a leather apron he set to work. "I'm going to make dogs and attach them to the bunks," he told Shorty Crumb, as he tuned up the anvil to his liking. Going on to explain the system of fastening the harrow-like teeth to the bunks so that if the sleigh should start to go downhill, they would stick into the ice and act as a brake to hold the heavy load until they could get it to moving forward again.

The dogs made and fastened to the bunks, Mickey felt the surge of confidence he had been hoping for. Now, in spite of the sixty below weather, he gave the word to get ready to move.

When the big Linn tractors had backed into place ahead of the boat, and the truck of sand had been fastened on behind, Mickey went around making the final inspection, his eyes resting proudly for a long minute on the big spikes which were to be his salvation if any of the couplings should break as they climbed up the dreaded hill.

With a last word of encouragement to his men, Mickey gave the signal to start.

The tractors were thrown into gear, and to their noise was added the crackling of the ice and the creaking of frozen wood as the boat lumbered forward. Up the steep, winding, narrow road it went, swaying on the curves and threatening to topple over.

Mickey went ahead, walking backwards, directing the outfit in its every move, while the two men on the truck worked with shovels tossing sand generously into the icy ruts behind the runners, knowing that if the sleigh should separate itself from the tractors ahead and the spikes should

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fail, without the sand they would be carried in a mad plunge to the foot of the hill and—— !”

They caught themselves up from thinking what would happen to them there, and shovelled furiously at the sand. It might be their only protection.

They were near the top of the hill when the engine of the tractor next to the boat stopped dead.

Joe Lacombe who was driving the front tractor looked to Mickey to give him the signal to stop, too ; and there was in his heart a great gratitude for the spikes that would hold them where they were until the other tractor could be started again. But the signal did not come. Instead Mickey waved to him to advance.

Joe did not hesitate. If the Boss wanted him to keep going, keep going he would.

The tractor responded to his call. Putting forth its utmost effort, it crawled up the hill, dragging the dead tractor, the boat and the truck of sand up the incline until, when it reached level ground, Mickey gave the signal to halt.

“Gosh, we made it !” came from all the men, with a sigh of relief. “I don’t know how we made it ; but we did !”

A moment later the dead tractor was ready to take up its share of the hauling. “Just a bit of ice clogging it up,” was the only comment the driver made ; but there was in him a great shame that his tractor had failed him at such a crucial moment.

They were ready now to cross the sixteen miles between the two forts ; but Mickey had no fear that he might not deliver the boat at the other side. The worst was over.

They moved along now without interruption until they came to a sharp sloping turn crossing Three-mile Creek, where the ruts had been shovelled deeper, and iced so that the sleighs would slide around easily, holding in place. But in spite of the slow pace at which they moved, the sleigh jumped the ruts and ran towards the brink of the bank.

Mickey, out in front, signalled frantically for a stop ;

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but just then steam from the exhaust hid him from the drivers. And when it cleared enough for them to get the signal, they were within three feet of the edge of the bank.

The men, a little shaken, worked hard now to get her jacked up and moved back into the ruts ; but they did not begin to breathe freely until they had deposited their cargo in her berth on the river bank above the sixteen mile stretch of rapids which had forced upon her the hazardous trip behind the tractors.

Then there was no holding back their exultation. " I never thought we'd make it," they said, " But we did ! We did ! "

A short rest and they had to return to Fort Smith to pull the *Margaret A* out to safety, for if she were left in the encasing ice, she would be carried away in the Spring break-up.

This done the men began to talk of the celebration they would hold when they reached Edmonton, and Mickey went about making the arrangements for the aeroplane to pick them up and carry them south.

He had little to say in his moment of victory : but in his heart was the consciousness of union with Infinite Love that comes with the accomplishment of a difficult task.

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THAT Fall when a telegram came in from Tom Payne saying, " I have struck it fabulously rich," Mickey refused to believe it.

" Every fellow that goes out prospecting in always striking it rich," he scoffed. " I've helped hundreds of them out when they'd just made a strike, but none of them ever came to anything."

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When Tom sent a letter to Pat and Billy Wilson confirming his telegram, adding, "If anyone comes to you wanting to buy any claims owned by us say 'No' at once. Sit tight, we are rich men," Pat showed it to Mickey. "What do you think?" he wanted to know.

"I've been through all the rushes they've had for twenty years," Mickey said, "And I've found the only way to make money is to stick to your work."

"But," Pat protested, "we've *got* money. We've struck it rich," he persisted, tapping the letter with a firm forefinger.

Mickey laughed. "Don't get excited about it," he said. "Better stick to the Portage," he advised. "That's our business; and when we get through, we'll be a whole lot better off than all those people who have been dabbling into the mining!"

Even when the geologists and mining engineers, on their way out from Yellowknife for the winter, told Mickey they figured Tom had something good, he remained unconvinced.

"Why don't you go in and see for yourself?" some of them asked, and Pat pressed him to go. "Mat Berry could take you in one day and fly you back the next," he suggested.

Mickey grinned. "I wouldn't mind the trip," he said and he went.

"I'm no mining man," Mickey would say as engineers and geologists flooded his ears with talk of "Blue quartz well fractured, richly mineralized and enclosed in heavy shist." Going on to more awe inspiring words like "Arsenopyrite calcopyrite with some stibnite."

"The only thing I can rightly understand, being a transportation man," he grinned, his eyes shrewd, "is that if we *have* got a mine, it won't be hard to get the gold out."

Tom Payne slapped Mickey's shoulder heartily. "Reason I picked out the property, Mick, was to please you,"

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he joshed. "No transportation problems at all, having the property running down this ravine to the water. No horses, no tractors ; just carry the stuff down to the plane and fly it to Edmonton."

Mickey laughed. "That's how all my transportation problems look to me at the beginning. Nothing to do but take the stuff from here to there," he paused. "But when I start moving it, it never is that simple."

All the way out on the plane Tom kept talking about the wonderful strike he had made ; and in the days at the Halfway while he waited for a boat to take him South, he would sit by the hour with pencil and paper, figuring out how much money they would all have from the mine.

Mickey would listen to him from the next room.

"Now that vein . . . you can follow it for three thousand feet . . . It is from two to five feet wide . . . Geologists say it'll go fifteen hundred feet deep . . ." The rest would be lost in muttering ; then his voice would come up strong again. "At seven hundred dollars a ton, that would be——?" For a moment there would be only the scratching of lead pencil against white paper, then he would lift his leonine head and say "Where's there another piece of paper? This one won't take all the money we've got!"

At which point Mickey would stick his head through the door to say, "All you've got to date is a piece of caribou pasture. That money is only if you have a *mine*!"

At last they got on the boat for McMurray. The geese were already honk-honking on their way south. Autumn was being crowded by winter.

Pat came to Mickey now. "Of course, Mick, you understand half the money I get out of this mine is yours," he said as casually as a child would hand over a pocketful of marbles.

"For the luvva Pete," Mickey would urge him, "don't go around talking about it as the 'mine.' It isn't and won't be a mine until it's worked and proves its got something."

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"Now, Mick," Pat would plead, "everyone says there's a mine. There must be!"

Mickey's face would harden then. "Old Potts and all them other old mossbacks at McMurray paid as high as five thousand dollars for their lots, thirty years ago or more, figuring they were going to make millions. And look at them! Just look at them!"

Pat's face would grow long then, and Mickey would soften enough to say, "It's all right to amuse yourself with the idea of Easy Money; but don't count on it!"

Billy Wilson came to him a half an hour before the boat docked. "Tom Payne had to give ten per cent. to the fellow that helped him stake the property. That leaves ninety per cent between the three of us, Pat, Tom, and myself. I'd like you to handle my share." He hesitated, then, awkwardly, "I know Pat'll be wanting you to handle his share for him; and I'd appreciate it if you'd look after mine, too."

Mickey swallowed hard before saying anything. "It's like I told Pat. It's all right to amuse yourself with the thought of *easy money*, but——"

Bill Wilson laughed. "This money won't come as easy as some people think," he said. "By the time we get to Edmonton, I figure there'll be a bunch of wolves on our heels trying to gyp us out of it. That's why I'm wanting you to handle it."

Still Mickey hesitated.

"I'll give you fifteen per cent. of my interest, if you'll take it on," he urged.

Pat joined them then, and Billy told him what he had in mind. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

Pat was quick to say "Me and Mick have always gone partners in everything. I don't see why there should be any change just because it's a *mine*," he told them.

"It's the way Tom wants it," they pressed, and Tom came up to add his word to theirs.

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"Fifteen per cent. isn't right," Mickey protested. "If you'll cut it down to ten per cent.," he suggested at last, "that'll give the four of us the same amount, and I'll do it." He grinned at them engagingly. "If there's nothing comes of it though, don't blame me."

Tom Payne's face set and his jaw jutted now. "This'll put Yellowknife on the map. You wait and see," he predicted, with a near-fanatical flash in his blue eyes.

The larger mining companies came now, bidding against each other for the property at the end of the Great Slave Lake. From twenty to thirty, to forty, and then to fifty thousand dollars the bids moved.

"No company is offering fifty thousand dollars for a piece of caribou pasture," Mickey said consideringly, "unless they think there's something there." And the decision was born to raise enough money to take in enough equipment to find out what was below the surface of the rough patch of land that Tom Payne had staked. "It's all very well you having crushed a little ore and found enough gold to get excited about," he told Tom, "but it's what's down in the bowels that counts."

Tom was voluble to the effect that there were tons of gold there; but Mickey was firm. "We'd better do some development work to find out whether we have anything to sell or whether we just have a nice surface showing."

"You can't develop a mine on peanuts," Pat reminded him. "It'll cost somewheres around a thousand dollars for the freight alone on a diamond drill before you get it in there and——" He reeled off expenses that mounted steadily until Mickey put his hand up to stop him.

"There's no use balking at putting a little money into development work, when Tom's already spent five years to find it," he said.

That winter Mickey spent raising the fifty thousand dollars he thought would be needed to develop the property, and the name Quinn-Kola was given to the newly-

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formed company. Quinn-Kola being the name used by the Indians to describe the "Fat of the Rock" or quartz which Tom had gone to such pains to discover. And in the spring they flew Tom Payne and Oley Hagen in to Yellowknife to get a camp made up so that it would be ready for the men who would arrive by the first boat, bringing diamond drills and equipment to start work on the property.

Tom Payne was no more in there when a wire came, reading, "Tom Payne fell and ruptured himself. Being flown to Edmonton to hospital there."

Mickey went to see him. Complications had set in, and while Tom spoke of "It may be a year before I'll be on my feet again," the doctors expected no such miracle. "He hasn't a chance," they said.

Mickey gave orders for the work to proceed.

"Don't worry about a thing, Tom," he said, as he stood by the hospital cot. "I'll look after everything." Everything took in the work on the mine and the hospital bills.

In a few days another telegram came from the North. "Oley Hagen cut himself with axe. Had to be flown to Fort Smith hospital."

Pat began to worry now. "Looks like we got hold of something that's going to be more bother than we counted on," he said with a sigh.

"Everything's bother," Mickey told him. "But now we've got into this thing, let's see it through."

"It'd be too bad if anything should happen to Tom Payne," Pat mourned. "Looks like he can't live much longer. It'd be terrible if he went through all those bad years prospecting, and then didn't get anything out of it."

"He can't get anything more than he's getting right now," Mickey comforted. "He can't get more than enough to eat and a nurse to take care of him."

"They say he can't possibly get better," Pat said, with a sad shake of his head. "Not really better. The scurvy took an awful toll of his strength," he lamented.

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A telegram came in from Oley Hagen. "Returning Yellowknife," it said, "Be sure good cook with party and supplies."

Mickey breathed a sigh of relief. "Now we can go up and look after the Portage with an easy mind," he said. "It'll take them all summer to get the stripping done up there and a few diamond drill holes made. So let's forget the whole thing until next Fall."

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MICKEY needed to have a free mind, for the task of portaging was becoming more demanding with the opening up of the mining country to the North, and that summer saw a new Diesel-driven, all-steel, vessel hauled across the sixteen mile road to be assembled in the bush at Fort Smith ready for the run between that point and Fort Norman, and well equipped to carry to the Eldorado Gold Mines the apparatus and supplies necessary to their work, and to bring radium and silver concentrates out on the return journey.

It promised to be a busy season, and no sooner had it started than: "The Governor General is making a trip down the Mackenzie River," Mickey was told. "You'll have to take him over the Portage."

"What'll we do if it rains?" Mickey wanted to know. "A good fall of rain just about ruins the road."

There seemed to be no answer to that except that if Lord Tweedsmuir wanted to take the trip across the Portage, he would have to take a chance on the weather the same as everyone else.

The whole District was in a flurry of excitement.

"Old Man Connibear has prepared a long Going-

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Over-the-Ice speech," Pat reported, "and everyone is all set for a big ceremony." Then, doubtfully, "Won't the Governor General be kind of disappointed when he finds that the Indians up here don't go in for feathers or any of that stuff?"

"And it's too hot for them to put on any of their furs," Mickey deplored, "He won't get much pleasure out of seeing them all dressed up in their mail-order finery."

Every Indian, half-breed and Metis was now putting in orders for gala clothes in which to receive the Governor General. The girls sent in their orders C.O.D. for silk dresses, new shoes and any extras that happened to strike their fancy as they thumbed their way through the mail order catalogue.

"Mrs. Champagne," they were referring to the wife of the Government Agent, and, therefore, one of the "Upper Four Hundred," "she has a purple dress. It looks good on her. We will get purple dresses," they decided. They ordered them. "She wears her slips with lace across here," motioning with their hands to indicate where the lace had been, then marked the order form, "Slip, lace trimmed."

The parcels came, and they had no money to pay for them; while the postmaster refused flatly to part with them until he got the money, cash in hand.

"But, Mr. Cook, we have to have them!" they pleaded. The postmaster was adamant. No money, no parcels.

They looked around for ways in which to make money quick.

They found a way, a way as old as Time itself, and soon they were able to pay "cash money" across the counter for the packages the Postmaster held for them, until their Bishop was forced into protesting, "These C.O.D. parcels, they are the ruination of our women. They send out for these things; and when they come, they have to get the money from *somewhere*!"

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But Lord Tweedsmuir when he appeared before them had no notion that the clothes they wore had been acquired at such high cost.

The day before his arrival Mickey announced that he would take the grader blade behind the Linn tractor himself. "It's pretty dangerous for anyone who does not know where all the culverts are," he said ; but the truth was that he was over-anxious for the road to be in perfect condition when the visiting party came over it the next day.

"Don't take it too fast," he warned the driver of the tractor, as they started out ; and soon they were working their way noisily along, levelling the road.

The weather was perfect, Mickey mused. A clear sky promised good weather for that day and the next, too. A black crow cawed from a nearby tree ; then whirled off, a sooty cloud against the brilliant blue.

Mickey watched it for a moment as it winged off.

When he took his eyes from it, it was too late for him to get the blade lifted high enough to miss a culvert and as the grader hit it, he was tossed high in the air to come down quickly to the ground in good position for the blade to catch him across the chest as it descended.

At that moment, just as the life was about to be crushed out of him, the tractor coughed itself to a stop. The driver, knowing nothing of what had happened, turned his head to say something to Mickey, and when he saw the over-alled figure on the ground rushed to it in terror, expecting it to be a corpse.

"Gosh, that knocked the wind out of me !" Mickey said, when the blade was released.

"You could have been cut in two if the tractor hadn't a stopped," the driver cried. "Now what made it stop ?" he scratched his head in perplexity.

"Search me !" Mickey was getting painfully to his feet. "Search me ! Unless the Good Lord figured I'd better get the road ready for Lord Tweedsmuir !"

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He got up after a while and finished the work.

"I'm full of aches and pains," he admitted, "but then, who wouldn't be after a fall like that?" he tried to make light of it.

The next day he went to meet the boat that was bringing the Governor General's party. He piled them into his car with the same ease of manner with which he would have met any passengers that were entrusted to him, and took them out to the Halfway.

"Maybe you'd like to look around," he suggested and Lord Tweedsmuir went with him from one building to another, marvelling at the garden, the bunkhouses, the cookhouse, the blacksmith shop and the barn.

Making the rounds of the barns, they stopped to speak to Pat Kelly, Lord Tweedsmuir shook hands with him. "And what is your job, Mr. Kelly?" he asked the old teamster.

Pat Kelly lifted his head until one would have needed a step-ladder to get up to his ears, "I'm *one* of the fellows that's responsible for putting white collars on the Ryan Brothers," he said with pride.

"Dinner'll be ready shortly," Mickey said soon after that. "Maybe you'd like to take a spell *off* sightseeing for a while, and just rest."

Lord Tweedsmuir accepted the suggestion with alacrity and a moment later was coaxing Mickey's three year old son, Joe, who was holidaying at the Halfway, to play with him.

"I've got a new wagon, see!" Joe looked up with a shy smile at his new friend. "It's a dandy wagon," he told him proudly, and made little pushing motions to show how easily it ran on its four wheels.

"Get on; and I'll give you a ride!"

Joe needed no second bidding, and soon the two were squealing delightedly as Lord Tweedsmuir raced wildly up and down the garden path dragging the "dandy"

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wagon behind him, while the brown-eyed boy clutched excitedly at the sides as it threatened to overturn, then righted itself and rolled merrily on.

The mid-day meal over, Mickey took the party in to Fort Smith where "Everything will be as formal as it would be in Edmonton or anywhere," Mickey warned them.

"I came here to avoid all that kind of thing," Lord Tweedmuir's thin face grew grave. "Is there no way to avoid it?" he wondered.

"No," Mickey told him. "I don't think so. They've made arrangements for a big reception to welcome you into the North West Territories. They don't often get a chance to put on a big show," he chuckled. "I guess you'll have to go through with it."

The Mounted Police were there in full regalia. Inspector Martin standing at attention in spite of the mosquitoes that kept everyone else busy slapping at them. The Indians were there in new moccasins, broad brimmed felt hats, and ill-fitting suits. The white women wearing long white kid gloves and the formal attire that goes with them; the other women adorned in their newest finery.

Mr. Connibear delivered his speech with gestures that fit it. He told of the past of the country, dwelt at length upon its future, promised wealth to everyone, and wrapped all of it up in the floweriest language he could muster.

Lord Tweedsmuir spoke then. In a few short sentences he thanked them for their welcome, praised their country, finishing with, "The greatest surprise of all in this country of surprises, was the automobile ride. I had to-day over one of the finest highways in Alberta. A highway which, I understand, we owe to the ingenuity of my friend, Mickey Ryan!"

He paused then to mop at his brow before making formal close to his speech, and into the pause came hurtling flintily, "I wonder how much Mickey Ryan gave him to say *that*?"

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As soon as the party was safely aboard the *Distributor* that would take them farther into the Mackenzie District, Mickey headed for the Mission Hospital.

"You'd better go Outside and have this attended to," they said when they had X-rayed his side. "All I can do for you is bandage the ribs that are broken," the sister said, "the other things that are wrong with you—— For them you will need more expert care."

Nothing more could be pried out of her.

"Before I go Outside, I'll have to go to Yellowknife and take a look at what's going on," he told Pat. "I can't tie up fifty thousand dollars of other people's money and then not be able to tell them what's doing."

"Davoe's piloting a plane in, and you could go with him," Pat told him, and Mickey boarded it.

"I've got a drunken Swede to take in," Davoe told him. "And I mean drunk," he warned; but Mickey climbed in beside the blonde man.

"Just pile yourself in anywhere," Davoe had told him, and Mickey squeezed in between the sides of beef and mining machinery that were being shipped into the mining town, and seating himself on a case of apples, waited for the take-off.

It came smoothly enough; but when they got over Great Slave Lake they flew into a storm that threatened to smash them if they did not land, while the water on the lake below was so rough that they did not dare come down on it.

The Swede moaned as he and Mickey were shaken like dice in a box, with complete disregard as to which side came up on top. *Bump!* They would come down and try to clutch at something. But everything was being jolted around so that all they could do was to keep from being inundated by the freight around them.

Mickey's side felt as if a thousand daggers were being stuck into it at once. His stomach was heaving. The

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Swede might have been sick even if they had not run into the storm ; but now there was no question about it.

A side of beef was tossed against Mickey's ribs. He lay, unable to push it away.

The plane rose, and it lay heavily upon him. The plane ducked and the beef was thrown away from him.

A second later a heavy piece of mining machinery came down on him, pressing hard against the bandaged ribs. A low groan came from him.

He made no other sound until the plane landed behind a cluster of islands at Yellowknife, and he could crawl down to earth with "Where's the townsite?"

Davoe held his arm a minute, urging him not to be in such a hurry. "We've been through the worst storm I've ever been up in," he declared. "We took a pretty bad buffeting," he grinned. "If you have no pity for yourself, have some for me. Give me time to get my breath back."

Mickey chuckled, but the chuckle brought agony with it. "I've got a couple of broken ribs," he tried to make light of it, but added that he would like to get home as fast as he could.

A rowboat, with Evinrude engine attached, was coming towards them now. "Here's our taxi," Davoe said. "It'll take you wherever you want to go : and if you're a drinking man, it'll take you across to where they are making some of that spitquick stuff."

Mickey assured him that he had no desire to try the homemade brew, and expressed the desire to be taken to the spot where Oley Hagen and the engineer were working on the property. "What I want to find out," he told Davoe, "is whether we have anything in that property to sell. If there is nothing in the core, why we don't want to sell anything."

Oley Hagen was delighted when he caught sight of Mickey. "The results of the drilling are very encouraging ; wherever we cut a vein we get free gold," he enthused.

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A pause, then : "There've been several representatives from the different mining companies busy going around looking the property over ?" It was definitely a question and on Mickey would fall the responsibility of ordering that "No Trespassing" signs be put up.

But Mickey only chuckled and said, "I don't see why they shouldn't look around. I don't think they can take any gold out of the ground or put any in, by looking at it."

"But the Consolidated people right next door, they don't even like to have flyers going over *their* property."

Mickey grinned. "Well, invite them over to our property and show them a little Northern hospitality," he suggested. "Maybe they'd enjoy it."

A little later he was on the plane headed for Edmonton.

"Rest," the doctors told him, when he got there. "Plenty of rest !" They shook their heads doubtfully.

"I can't rest for a few days anyway," Mickey told them. "I've got a mine to sell."

31

HE had only a day to wait before the representatives of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company were in Edmonton. Mr. Archibald setting himself up as spokesman for the company, while Mr. Jewett acted as his second. Mickey brought his lawyer, Harry Friedman, with him for support.

Greetings and introductions over, Mr. Archibald motioned to the others to sit down. "Now," he said affably, "I am interested in this property, and we would like to make a deal which will be fair to you and fair to ourselves." He pursed his lips and let a good-sized silence roll up before enquiring whether Mickey had any proposition in mind.

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Mickey's face was without expression as he settled down to the game of trading. "I have no figure in mind," he said evenly, going on to say that his small Company had not yet done as much work on the property as they had in mind to do, "and owing to me having got my ribs broken up while levelling the road off, I didn't spend as much time as I wanted to with the engineer at Yellowknife." He met Mr. Archibald's eyes squarely. "You and Mr. Jewett know more about the property than I do," he told them.

They gave a little start, and Mickey went on to say that as Mr. Jewett had inspected and examined the property and was familiar with it, he would like them to make an offer.

Having said this, he sat back in his chair waiting for them to make the next move in the trade.

Mr. Archibald had to say something. "Yes," he admitted, "Jewett has been up there, and has spent a lot of time looking over the property." Then, with sudden directness, "I never do any haggling," he said. "We make only *one* offer." He folded his arms and spoke above them. "I have been in the mining business a good many years. I have seen a lot of prospects that the prospectors could have got a good price for," he smiled slightly. "There is one price in the target that most of them are holding out for—One Million Dollars—and I have helped bury a good many of them."

Mickey, glancing out of the corner of his eye at Mr. Jewett, could see that he was fidgeting under the haughtiness of his superior.

Mr. Archibald pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and Mickey turned his full attention to him. "Bill Jewett and I have spent a lot of time on this," Mr. Archibald said. Then went on with routine questions as to how Quinn-Kola was organized, how many shareholders there were, and the number of shares held by the four men who had started the company. Mickey told him.

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Now Mr. Archibald was ready to make his offer. A hundred and fifty-nine thousand dollars, in cash, for a seventy per cent. interest in the property. He sat back again, folded his arms and said coldly, "I want no haggling. If you don't take it, there'll be no hard feelings."

Mickey took the piece of paper, looked at it consideringly before folding it over, as he said quietly "I don't know anything about mining; so I have to be guided by the people that are working for me. They're supposed to know," he said with confidence, "and they say it is worth more than that."

Mr. Archibald let his arms drop.

"I guess we'll have to do a little more work on the property before we start selling," Mickey told them. Then, taking out his watch, he looked at it and said, "It's away past noon. I guess we'd better go and eat."

They made their way to the dining room; and Mickey chatted over lunch about everything except mining, so that no one would have suspected he had any thought for it.

When they had finished their meal, they left the big high-ceilinged room, and crossing the lobby of the hotel, made their way to the elevator which would take them back to Mr. Archibald's room.

There, waiting to be taken up, stood Mr. Dorfman of the Anglo-Huronian Limited, a company that was giving the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company keen competition. Mr. Archibald and Mr. Jewett backed up a little at the sight of him; suspecting immediately that he, too, was after the Quinn-Kola property.

Mickey, however, shook hands with Mr. Dorfman in a friendly way, exchanging pleasantries; then mentioning that he was on his way over to the hospital to see Tom Payne, the prospector who had made the lucky strike.

Mr. Dorfman was full of interest immediately "Isn't it a small world!" he exclaimed. "When I was over in

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England recently, they asked me, seeing I came from Canada, if I knew Tom Payne."

He was so eager that Mickey invited him to make the trip to the hospital with him. Mr. Dorfman accepted the invitation with alacrity and Mickey turned to Harry Friedman, "I'll see you later on," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Dorfman is coming with me to the hospital to see Tom." Harry nodded and Mickey turned towards the door, stealing a look at Mr. Archibald's face as he moved. He was pleased at the anxiety he saw staring out of it.

When he had visited Tom and taken Mr. Dorfman back to the hotel, he went over to the Bank of Commerce Building where Harry Friedman had his office.

"Well, Harry, what do you think?" Mickey wanted to know, pulling the small change from his pocket and clicking it together with unseeing eyes.

Harry leaned back in his comfortable swivel shair. "I don't know how to advise you, Mickey," he told him. Then, a little anxiously, "Mr. Archibald made it pretty plain to us that that was their best offer. Now," he leaned forward, and picking up a paper clip twisted it out of shape and threw it in the wastepaper basket before continuing, "If a war should break out, or they get a few bad holes up there, and the thing cools off, the shareholders are going to say that you were a damn fool, being too greedy when you could have made a good deal with the Consolidated Mining and Smelting. "He picked up another clip and began to twist it out of shape. "And if you happen to make a better deal, that will be fine." He shrugged his shoulders and made an upward gesture with his hands that indicated his own lack of hope in that direction.

Mickey clicked the money savagely, then thrust it into his pocket. "All that has been going through my head," Mickey told him. "I was thinking of that in Archibald's room." He got to his feet. "And if you think it was easy for me to get up off that hundred and fifty nine thousand

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dollar chair that I was sitting on, I can tell you different ! ”

Harry faced him. “ You don’t think they’re through then ? ” he made it a question.

“ No, I don’t,” Mickey said with conviction. Then backed his words up with, “ Archibald sitting there with his arms folded. He played just a little too independent to have aces backed up ; and when I went out with Mr. Dorfman I could see his feathers drop.” His eyes were shrewd.

Harry Friedman was of a different mind, and said so.

Mickey remained unconvinced. “ I’m gambling they’re not through,” he said, setting his hat at a jaunty angle and moving towards the door, “ I’ll go home and read,” his eyes twinkled, “ so that I’ll be close to the telephone if they start looking for me.”

That was early afternoon.

Mickey had to wait until after seven o’clock that evening before the telephone rang. Then Mr. Archibald’s voice came cool and slow over the wire, saying that he had to leave on the midnight train for Trail ; but that he would like to see Mickey before he left so that they could chat about transportation problems in the North, and inviting him to drop in at the hotel.

On the way there Mickey ran into Harry Friedman, and passed on the news that he was going to Mr. Archibald’s room to say good-bye.

Harry’s face lifted. “ Looks good, Mickey ! ” he declared heartily. Then, “ I’ll be over at the Rialto Theatre in case you need me,” he added.

“ Don’t wait too long for me,” Mickey warned, “ for if they want to talk about transportation I will talk to them until the train goes ; but I will never mention the mine or the property. He said he didn’t want to haggle.” He paused ; then, grinning, “ but if he mentions the mine deal, I’m not going to haggle with *him*. I’m going to

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hit him between the eyes. I'm going to ask him for a half a million dollars ! ”

“ *Phew !* ” Harry Friedman drew his breath in sharply. “ My, there's a lot of difference between the two of you ! ” he said with awe. Then, “ Good luck to you, Mickey,” he said and turned slowly up First Street.

Mickey continued on his way down Jasper Avenue. Past the Shasta Cafe, across the square and up the broad steps of the Macdonald Hotel.

In Mr. Archibald's room he took off his overcoat and hat and settled himself down to talk. At nine o'clock they were discussing transportation in the North ; at ten o'clock they were still discussing it ; at eleven Mickey was proving that his well of information on the subject would never run dry. Then at eleven fifteen he got to his feet. “ Well, Mr. Archibald,” he said pleasantly, “ you'll be wanting to get packed if you're to get that midnight train for the West ; and I should be getting along home.” He shook hands with both men as he said, “ If there is anything I can do for you any time, just let me know.”

He had the door open and was ready to step through it when Mr. Archibald stopped him with, “ I'm sorry we couldn't make a deal on the property.”

Mickey turned and faced him fully. “ You're not half as sorry as I am.” Mickey stroked the dent in his grey felt hat with the edge of his hand. “ You have a mill on the property alongside it. You could bring it into production faster than anyone could ; and I promised to give you first chance on the property.” He paused, before pouring the next words out in well-rounded perfection, “ I want to give you first chance.” He lifted his head a little, then laid his proposition flat in front of them, “ I want a half a million dollars for a sixty per cent. interest in the property, and let us retain forty per cent. of it.”

“ Mickey, that is a pretty big pill ! ” Mr. Archibald said, staggered.

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"I understand from the people that are working for me that it is a pretty big pill you are buying," Mickey smoothed the dent in his hat preparatory to putting it on his head, "If you don't accept, there'll be no hard feelings," he said quietly. "I have kept my word and given you first chance at the property. Now I am free to go and do business with somebody else."

Mr. Archibald held out a restraining hand as Mickey moved to go. "Could you take \$150,000.00 down, \$150,000.00 in twelve months, and \$200,000.00 in twenty-four months?" he asked.

"We both said we did not want any haggling over this deal," Mickey's face was like the limestone of his native Indiana, "I would like to get enough out of the first payment to give all the shareholders their money back. It would be nice to give them that now, then the same amount in a year's time."

Mr. Archibald took a turn about the room before he spoke. Then resignedly, "We will give you the five hundred thousand dollars," he said. "Three hundred thousand of it upon the signing of the agreement and two hundred thousand in twelve months time. You to retain a forty per cent interest."

"All right," Mickey said, "The property is yours!"

They shook hands all round. Then Mickey sat down to give details for the drawing of the agreement, to be turned over to the legal department of the company so that the documents could be drawn, while Mr. Archibald lifted the telephone receiver, and putting in a call to his company at Trail gave instructions to forward the two carloads of machinery for the Ryan property as he had closed the deal.

"The biggest sale of its kind in mining history," was how the newspapers described it. For nowhere in the world had such a price ever been paid for an almost undeveloped property. "The deal puts the North West

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Territories solidly on the map, and will mean the attraction of further capital to the field as a whole."

Tom Payne on his back in the hospital, with the promise of only a few months to live, mumbled that he would have held out for more money ; but the receipt of the cheque for the first payment seemed to put new life into him. He started to get better. His capable nurse took on his care for all time, " for better or for worse " and hardly had the wedding bells rung than he was headed for the North and prospecting again.

To Mickey the unexpected windfall meant freedom to invest in another ranch. Ever since the floods had taken the one on the Slave River, he had been hankering after something to take its place ; and now with the money to finance it, there seemed no reason why he should not have one, especially as he needed a place where he could raise hay and grain for the stock at the Halfway and the horses used at various points in the North, while fresh meat was still being longed for by the people of Forts Fitzgerald and Smith.

At first he had no thought beyond serving the needs of the North ; but when he moved his family into the Ranch House, saddle horses, bantams, pheasants, peacock and pigeons became a part of the set-up. While the annual round-up of the cattle in the fall, with Mickey in chaps and stetson hat on a palomino horse, brought onlookers by the hundreds from the close-by city of Edmonton, and the Ranch became the show place of the community.

To the city folk the sight of the cattle being herded into the corrals was a glimpse of the Old West, and they revelled in it, wondering at the submarine stoves that kept the water in the troughs from freezing, and climbing up on the fence to watch the cattle being driven into the chutes to be castrated or dehorned.

After fattening on the farm, the stock was shipped up to the Halfway and put out in the feedlot there to eat the

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hay and oats from their home fields to await butchering in the up-to-date slaughter-house that had been built for this purpose.

Soon, not only the towns at either end of the Portage were clamouring for fresh meat ; but the hotels and transportation companies were crying for supplies, so that Mickey had to put in a large refrigerator and modern butcher shop to take care of the new trade.

Mickey was using a plane now to take him in and out of the North ; and, unless the work was very heavy on the Portage, he spent most of his time out on his ranch.

" It'll be a nice place for us to retire on," he would yell in Pat's ear.

With Pat retorting, good naturedly. " You're more'n half retired now, only you don't know it ! "

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IN 1938 twelve thousand tons of freight crossed the Portage during the summer, with petitions still going out to the Government protesting against one man having a monopoly on the road ; while the Government continued to refuse to maintain it.

In 1939 with prospectors and mining men declaring a new North was opening up, the cries of protest became louder. That winter might have seen the lengthiest petitions in the world sent out, had not War struck and pessimism struck with it.

" The North'll be forgotten," they wailed. " We'll never get anywhere now ! "

Talk of the great Highway to Alaska brought a flurry of hope to some Northern hearts ; but as it would not pass

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through McMurray or Smith or Fitzgerald, it excited little interest at these points.

However, when word got around that a pipeline was to be run from Fort Norman, and that thousands of tons of freight would pass across the Portage, the people went wild.

"That Mickey Ryan is going to clean up a fortune on the Portage," they fumed. "They say the Americans will pay *anything* to get what they want!"

But when Mickey was approached by the officials of the Canol Project, wanting to know what arrangements would have to be made for getting supplies across the Portage as they understood he had control of it, Mickey was quick to say, "As far as the Ryan Brothers are concerned, there is a war on. If the strip between Fitzgerald and Smith is the road to Tokyo, take it. It's yours to get there!"

They went on then to outline their plans for burying the four-inch pipelines that would be needed to pipe the oil out of Fort Norman, and Mickey elevated an eyebrow enquiringly. "Did you say *bury*?" he asked at last.

"Yes, bury!" the official was a little impatient. Then, at something in Mickey's face, "It'd have to be buried to keep it from freezing, wouldn't it?" he enquired.

Mickey fidgeted a little before making any answer. Then he said slowly, "The frost goes kind of deep up North for burying a pipeline."

"How far down does the frost go?" The voice was crisp.

"All I know is what the engineers tell me," Mickey said quietly, "and they say the frost goes down around ninety feet up there; sometimes more."

"Impossible!" the official ejaculated.

"Maybeso," Mickey was not agreeing, "but there are plenty of engineers belonging to the Imperial Oil Company, and you could find out from them."

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A little later they began to discuss the Portage. "We'll widen the road," they announced. "It'll have to be wider to take all the extra freight it'll have to carry."

Mickey nodded.

"We'll have an army of men to do the work and we'll bring in the gravel."

Mickey shook his head now. "The nearest gravel pit is three hundred miles away," he told them, going on to point out the difficulties of making gravel stay in the muskeg without a stone foundation.

"What is the road made of now?" they wanted to know.

Mickey told them; explaining that logs of jackpine had been laid first, then filled in with mud and sand.

Now they were ready to show him that they had investigated this country they were coming into, as they told him he should have used tamarac logs instead of the jackpine. "Tamarac won't rot under water," they said glibly. "It's the wood you ought to have used for your road."

"The trouble is," Mickey was quick to tell them, "the tamarac doesn't grow very thick up there. You'll find one tree; then maybe go on half a mile before you'll find another that is worth cutting down." He clicked his money noisily. "And, anyway," he pointed out, "the frost doesn't go out of the ground much up at the Portage. If you dig down there through the sand, you'll find the logs are frozen in solid. They'll never rot."

A little later Mickey, irked by the questions asked by some of the higher officials, took Mr. Paul Grafe to one side. "There's no use colonels with all their iron braid, and fish sinkers on their chests, asking me questions and expecting me to tell them what they want to hear," he fumed. "I've been in that country for thirty years, and I just know the truth."

When they talked to him of expensive equipment and costly paraphernalia, he shook his head. "The country

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isn't ready for that kind of thing yet," he'd say. "There's muskeg and flood and ice to contend with," and went on to tell them that they could put in a road to meet the emergency of war, but it would have no more strength than a cobweb under Northern weather.

There was, however, plenty of advice he could give them in the world with which he was familiar; and he gave to them freely out of the store of his knowledge.

"You'll need to get a few teams of dogs. For as soon as the snow starts to fly you'll have to have sleds to get your engineers and surveyors hauled out ahead on the line where they are working," he advised; but they laughed at him, assuring him that they would be finished their work long before freeze-up.

But when Autumn brought threat of Winter, they asked Mickey to try to locate some dogs for them.

"You'll have to get your dogs fast if you want to get them," he told them, "As once it takes to snowing, there isn't an Indian will part with any of his team, for he'll be needing them. But if he's offered a good price now, he'll never think far enough ahead to know that the time will come when he'll want them himself."

"We've got to have the dogs." The answer was sure.

"And then you'll need Indian dog drivers."

This remark brought a laugh. "We ought to be able to drive a few dogs ourselves," they commented. "There's nothing to it."

"Nothing to it!" Mickey grinned wryly. "Have you ever handled a team of dogs?" He flung the question at them.

"No, but——"

"Well, handling a team of dogs is quite a chore," Mickey said. "They've got to be hitched just right, and fed just so. Then if the snow gets icy you have to put mocassins on the dogs, and take them off and dry them at every stop," going on to point out that they had to be removed at top speed or the dog's feet would freeze.

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"What?" It was a gasp.

"And someone has to break trail on snowshoes or the dogs will lie down on you," Mickey laid the information down neatly in front of them.

"All right, Mickey! All right!" they agreed, and instructed him to get some Indian dog drivers for them. Then: "How many teams will we need?"

Mickey did some rapid calculation. "About eight," he figured.

They nodded. "You should have about four extra teams, too," he suggested, "for if one of your aeroplanes was to come down in an awkward spot, where you couldn't fly in to it, what'd you do?"

They had a ready answer for that, assuring Mickey that they would hire someone to go in with a team of dogs. "Lots of fellows around would go in on a rescue party." There was calm assurance in the voice.

"Lots of fellows would be glad to go, if they could be found," Mickey croaked. "But if you were to get a plane down somewhere in the bush, and you had to start running around organizing dogs and drivers and stuff to send a rescue party in, it would take a long time to get them; and chances are you would get dogs that had not been working hard and they would not be much good to you." Mickey's face was grave as he went on. "You go in there with soft men or soft dogs, and the first thing you know the dogs will be lying down panting; and a soft man is no good to break the trail ahead of them. They all have to be able to travel thirty or forty hours without stopping."

Immediately they scoffed at that as involving tremendous expense for the maintenance of dogs and drivers, which might never be used.

But Mickey was quick to point out that it might mean the lives of several men. "It'd be a case of going to all the expense of maintaining the equipment, then praying you'll never have an accident and need it."

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"We'd better get the dogs in then," Mr. Grafe gave his O.K. to it. Then, "Where'll we keep them?" he wanted to know, drawing attention to the fact that the dogs would have to be kept around Edmonton where they could be picked up and flown North at a moment's notice.

"The Ryan Brothers have enough land for you to keep a few dogs on, I guess," Mickey told him, "and nearly four thousand acres of territory for them to work over every day."

"Well, you go and buy the dogs," Mr. Grafe directed, and Mickey set off for Cold Lake, two hundred and fifty miles away, leaving instructions for corrals to be built during his absence.

It took him two weeks to buy up the sixty dogs and hire the dog drivers, and he left for Edmonton, driving in a big sedan behind the rack truck on which he had loaded the dogs.

When he got home to St. Albert at eleven o'clock on a frosty Sunday night, he found that the corrals had not been completed.

"The only thing to do is to unload them," he eyed the howling dogs resignedly, "and tie them up along the fence."

The men went about unloading the two decks of huskies and tying them.

"We'd better give them all the fish they can eat," Mickey said, nodding towards the sacks of dried fish they had brought with them from Cold Lake.

"I guess as soon as they get something to eat, they'll stop howling," Bugg, his farm manager, hoped.

"Maybe," Mickey said non-committally, and set one of the men to hauling pails of water for the dogs to drink.

Still the howls continued.

"Well, we'd better get to bed," Mickey said, his face grey with exhaustion. But he could not sleep. "The neighbours'll be coming up here to-morrow with protests," he predicted.

He got up, and pulling on his clothes, "Come on out

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with me," he called to Bugg. "We'll carry down some hay for them to lie on. Maybe if they have a bed, they'll settle down."

But the dogs scorned the hay, and continued to howl at the moon until morning broke.

The near-neighbours complained. But Mickey stopped their grumblings by inviting them out for a sleigh ride; helping them into parkies and wrapping them in caribou blankets and rabbit skin robes, and sending them out for a "mush" around the countryside.

Forty of the dogs went off to the dull work of hauling workmen in the North, but twenty stayed at the Ryan Ranch where they were given the hard exercise that would keep them fit for the emergency call everyone hoped would never come.

"The dogs have to go out on the trail every day, anyway," Mickey would say, "They might as well take a load with them."

At first strangers came with their children to ask somewhat timidly whether the little ones might have a ride; but after Mickey had bundled the whole family in furs and sent them off on the sled with instructions to "Enjoy yourselves and have a good time," then, on their return, invited them into the house for sandwiches and coffee, word spread around that visitors were welcome at the Ryan Ranch, and people flocked there by the thousands.

American Air Force boys came in dozens; the Manning Pool sent boys from every part of the Empire, Australia, New Zealand, Old London, Belfast or Dundee; every worker on the Alaska Highway; every soldier on leave, wanted to see the dogs and ride behind them.

"We've got to expect anywhere from fifteen hundred to two thousand every Sunday afternoon," Mickey said. "Most of them have to be onlookers, of course; but they get a kick out of watching the dogs. Especially when we get the teams to racing."

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Archbishop Breynat came in his worn muskox-skin coat. "When I was in the North, I was glad when I got away from the dog team and could use the speedy snowplane for getting around my big parish," he laughed. "Now that I'm retired, I'd like to go for a ride behind the dogs again."

Mickey helped him into the sled, tucking the skin robes around his passenger.

"This coat is getting kind of small for you, isn't it?" Mickey grinned, patting a rubbed sleeve with a touch of tenderness.

"It is an old coat," the Archbishop said with affection. "But there'll never be another like it now." He pulled at its edges where it gaped; but it refused to come together. Made from the brown and grey skins of the unborn muskox, it surely could not be replaced now; for in all the close to thirty years Mickey had been in the North he had never seen a live muskox.

"They've almost died out," the Archbishop said quietly, as Mickey fussed with the robes, "not only because they were killed in great numbers by the natives; but Nature did not seem to care much for them. She could have protected them by having the calves born in the spring of the year. Instead they calved any time; and during the last few years they were around, a lot of calves were born in the wintertime. They couldn't survive the cold and the storms."

"It's a beautiful coat," Mickey said softly. During all his years in the North he had been seeing his friend in that coat on the coldest days. The man and the coat seemed to go together somehow. Both equal to whatever the North might bring in the way of trying weather.

Mickey watched as the sled pulled off. And now sadness poured itself over him. "He'll soon have out-grown the coat altogether," he thought.

He huddled closer into his own coat then.

* * * *

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The dogs were never needed in the North.

"We never had an accident," Mr. Grafe exulted, "and those dogs sure gave a lot of people pleasure." He paused for a moment. "A lot of young Air Force fellows'll remember this part of the country a lot kindlier on account of the dog rides."

Mickey grinned. "Especially the boys from Australia and places like that."

Mr. Grafe's face became serious. "I don't know what a lot of Americans up on the Highway project would have done, Mickey, if they hadn't had your place to go to."

"It's been good for everybody," Mickey said, pleased. Then, "Now what're we going to do with the dogs?"

"Keep them," Mr. Grafe urged.

"Oh now," Mickey laughed, "the neighbours don't mind putting up with the dogs howling every moonlight night as long as it's part of a war project; but they'd never permit it just for the pleasure of entertaining people."

Mr. Grafe nodded. "I guess not," he admitted. Then shifting the responsibility from his own shoulders, he told Mickey to do what he liked about them.

Mickey's face grew long. "You can't ship these dogs back to a life of hardship among the Indians, after they've been petted by white people and made a lot over. Fed well, too." He drew a swift picture of a dog's life among the Indians; worked until he was ready to drop in the wintertime, starved in the summertime, and beaten on the slightest provocation with whatever instrument was handiest to serve as a club.

Mr. Grafe swallowed a lump in his throat. "I never thought of that," he declared.

Mickey backed up a little from facing the fact that something had to be done about the dogs. They must either be sold to the Indians, or . . . destroyed.

"I guess I'll have to shoot them," he admitted at last. Then, "I'll wait until we get to the end of the dried fish,"

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he told himself, running an estimating eye over the supply of dog food. "Two days," he figured, and wondered whether he could keep his hand steady on the trigger if he tried to shoot them himself.

One of the two days went past and he faced the ordeal before him with even less relish than ever, for the dogs, sensing that something was wrong, licked at his hands whenever he came near them, and tried in every way they could to show their affection for him.

"I'll have to get a vet to do the shooting," he said the next day, as he picked up the *Journal* and shook it out before starting to read. "I could no more go out there and kill off those dogs than I could murder someone."

He glanced over the headlines, before changing his mind. "It'd be better if I did it myself. I'll get Bugg to help me," he told himself, putting the paper down unread.

He was pulling on his coat when the telephone rang. "Did you see the evening paper?" the hearty voice at the other end of the line asked, and Mickey muttered "No" and "Yes" in the same breath.

"The papers are having a real good laugh because someone in Hollywood wired the Publicity Department of the Alberta Government to ask them where they could get some dogs and reindeer for some picture they want to take. Of course we couldn't get them any reindeer, but how about the dogs?"

Mickey steadied himself. "I'll read the paper, and—Thanks for calling." He hung up the receiver. "He'll never know how glad I am he called me," and picked up the paper.

He skimmed over the first few lines, then "Here is a wire, asking for dogs and deer for Hollywood. Evidently they think Edmonton is in the bush!" There was more, much more; but Mickey did not read it. Instead he was picking up the telephone to put in a call for the Paramount Studios in California.

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"Do you want deer and dogs?" he asked.

"Yes," came the answer.

"Well, I have the dogs; and I think I know where I can get the deer," he told them; and they promised to send someone to Edmonton to look them over.

Mickey hung up the receiver and went out to the corrals. The dogs let out a howl of welcome. They seemed to know that this was no hangman coming towards them. His son, Pat, came out behind him. "It's just the right ending for them," he said quietly, with a touch of envy in his voice.

"Yes," Mickey agreed. "I couldn't have thought up a better ending for them myself." He leaned down and pulled affectionately at a soft brown ear. "I wish I'd known about this before though," he said, "I've been through a couple of very bad days, thinking I was going to have to shoot them."

The dogs howled at the moon all that night, and every night until they were taken aboard the train for Hollywood. Mickey liked to lie in bed and listen to them. To him the howling had become a triumphant cry that told of victory over threatening death. It echoed something of his own feeling, and he revelled in it.

When a few days later, the moon shone on the empty corrals, and the Ryan Ranch lay in silence under its silvery light, Mickey could not sleep. "It seems as though, with it being so quiet and all, I can hear my heart beating," he said a couple of times, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Why don't you see a doctor?" That was Harry Freidman. "You've been going too hard," his eyes were full of concern as he looked at the grey, swollen lips of his friend.

"I think I will," Mickey agreed, and Harry knew that he was well aware of his need for medical advice.

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"THIS is no climate for you, Mr. Ryan," the doctor's voice was grave. "You'll have to get to a lower altitude," he warned. Then, "I'd suggest Victoria!"

"Victoria!" Mickey croaked at mention of the name of the coast city, "Victoria!"

"What have you got against it?" the doctor enquired a little impatiently. "Some of our best people retire to Victoria!"

"Maybeso," Mickey said slowly, "but I think I'd just as soon take my chances here as move to Victoria," he said gloomily.

"Have you ever been there?" the doctor demanded sharply.

"Yes," Mickey drawled. Then, standing up defiantly, "and believe it or not," he declared, "while I was out there, I saw a dog chasing a cat down one of the streets, and *they were both walking!*"

A little later he walked into Harry Friedman's office. "Looks like I'm going to have to get out of here," he said, and Harry pulled up a chair. "Sit down," he invited. Then, looking at Mickey's drawn face, "he told you to move to Victoria, I suppose?"

Mickey nodded.

"Don't look so stricken," Harry urged. "There are other places you can go besides Victoria, you know."

"I like it here," Mickey said stubbornly, thinking of the big brick house that nestled in the shadow of the Village of St. Albert, eight miles from Edmonton. Thinking of the friends he would have to leave; of the aeroplane trips when he had flown over checkerboard fields, tall pines and great rivers, up to the Portage. "I like it here," he re-

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peated, his voice chock-full of yearning over the place he must leave. "Besides," he chafed, "I don't want to retire to some apartment or hotel and spend all my time waiting for the daily paper to appear!"

"What do you want to do?" Harry asked quietly.

Mickey coloured slightly and hesitated, before plunging into the reasons why he wanted to be on a farm. "The people of Europe'll need food, even after the war is over," he said, "and it'd give me some pleasure knowing I was helping, a little."

"To provide food in famine is not a little thing!" Harry's brown eyes were a trifle moist. Then, crisply, "Why not try Quebec? It might have something to offer you."

"Quebec!" Mickey faltered. "Quebec is a long ways from here."

"Take a trip down there," Harry urged. "Just look it over. You don't have to settle there if you don't want to!"

* * * *

In the spring Mickey wandered through the eastern province where Old France lingers on, touching the speech and manners of the people in spite of the Maritimers to the east, the Americans to the South and the English-speaking neighbours of the West. Out to Huntingdon and back again; then over to Stanstead and across to Richmond. In spite of the rain that fell every day, he kept looking.

"On the Bromptonville Road, there's a big brick house, built by an Irishman," came the word; and he went to see it.

"It was built by a man by the name of Tyrrel," they told him, "and his boast was, that he had built it so solid and well that he could lie on the floor *and never feel a draught!*"

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"It's a good place for growing children," Mickey said consideringly. "Lots of place for them to run and grow," and he bought it ; then gave orders for the palomino horses and the Shetland ponies to be shipped from the Alberta Ranch, before ordering in the cattle he would fatten for shipment across the Atlantic.

"Maybe we'll be able to ship some up to the Halfway, too," he hoped.

* * * *

Soon after that Japan cried "Quit!" and the war in the Pacific came to an end. Now the six years of hostilities were over and the men who had gone to fight would be returning.

The North heard the march of their feet as they stepped down the gangplank from the ships that brought them back to their own shores, and she picked up her megaphone to make her call. But the cries "Adventure!" and "Easy Money!" died on her lips as she saw the big strapping men of war before her. To them, who had fought for life itself, she must offer something more.

"*Opportunity!*" she called ; then "*Service!*"

And the sight of the young men crossing the Portage as they followed the call, was like precious ointment on the head of Mickey Ryan.

"I built the road for them," he said in proud-humility, as the feet that had tramped through battlefield mud, marched up his trail to the North.

THE END.

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